

## **‘Imperialism runs deep’: Interview with Robert Biel on British Maoism and its afterlives**

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In this interview, Robert Biel recounts his experiences of the British Maoist movement in the 1980s, the positive lessons that can be drawn from it, and the need for Marxists to transcend Eurocentrism and connect with diverse struggles against oppression.

Maoism was a truly global movement, and the radical energies unleashed by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution captured the imagination of the New Left generation, including in Britain. In 1976, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Labour government Denis Healey racistly referred to his left-wing critics as being ‘out of their tiny Chinese minds’ (quoted in Tom Buchanan, *East Wind: China and the British Left*, p. 189).

From the standpoint of the revolutionary left, a more specific impact was made by the Chinese Communist Party’s polemics against Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘revisionist’ notion of peaceful coexistence with capitalism during the Sino-Soviet split. From the 1960s–80s anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism (often simply referred to as Maoism) amassed tens of thousands of followers in France, Germany and Scandinavia, but as Tariq Ali points out equivalent currents in Britain were far smaller. This was partly due to the predominance of Trotskyism among the British New Left intelligentsia, as well as the absence of a mass Communist Party from which sizeable Maoist factions could emerge. Nonetheless, there were a smattering of anti-revisionist splinters from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB),

which most surviving Marxist-Leninist groups in the country can trace their lineage back to.

Very little is written on Maoism in Britain, beyond the scattered sources held at the [Encyclopaedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line](#), and the media sensationalism surrounding the [Balakrishnan cult](#). The movement is usually cast in negative terms, focusing on the excesses of ideological struggle and sectarian insularity. However, as Robert Biel argues in this interview, the interventions of the Chinese Communist Party had contradictory results. The desire of many anti-revisionists to uphold an ‘untainted’ version of Marxism-Leninism, while cutting against the reformist drift of Occidental communism, did often lead to an ossification of theory and practice, as remains strongly apparent with lingering micro-sects such as the [Communist Party of Great Britain \(Marxist-Leninist\)](#) (CPGB-ML).

At the same time, the Chinese revolution represented a crushing blow against global imperialism. Western Maoism was not just a movement of white students, as the stereotype holds, and the example of China as a beacon of ‘Third World’ socialism held appeal to many Black and Brown radicals in Britain. Mao’s China was a key reference point for [Claudia Jones](#) and the militant [Caribbean Workers’ Movement](#), several [British Black Power](#) organisations, and the great [Indian Workers Association](#). Such cross-fertilising currents, largely erased from the historical memory of the British left, ran parallel to more widely studied trajectories in the North American context (see e.g. Max Elbaum’s *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*).

As Robert Biel affirms, there are many positive things to take from the Maoist experience: its relative successes in building support for global South liberation movements, the openings it provided to challenge Eurocentric distortions of socialism, and the notion of continual struggle and renewal of Marxism. A member of the [Revolutionary Communist League of Britain](#) (RCLB), a group [described by a contemporary](#) as representing ‘the more serious side of Maoism’ who were involved in a number of anti-imperialist and anti-racist campaigns including the [Bradford Twelve](#), Biel authored an internationally circulated monograph titled *[Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement](#)* which first appeared in 1987 and was reprinted in an updated form in 2015. Biel now teaches Political Ecology at University College London, and his more recent books are *The New Imperialism* (2000), *The Entropy of Capitalism* (2011), and *Sustainable Food Systems: The Role of the City* (2016), which is [available open access](#).

**Robert Biel:** First of all, thanks so much for this invitation, and I'm honoured to contribute to this project.

The starting point for your inviting me was the book *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement*, and I did indeed initiate the project which led to this (the Political Economy Study Group, convened under the auspices of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain), and I also researched and wrote the book. However, this was only made possible by a far-reaching movement of political struggle and mass work launched by the Marxist-Leninist movement, which I played only a very small part in initiating. I was educated by my comrades, and also – as a result of our collective effort to overturn the racism and imperialist supremacism characteristic of much of the Left – in particular by the close collaboration which we developed with Black and oppressed-nationality fighters.

**Alfie Hancox:** Can you tell us about the political climate – national and international – which shaped the outlook of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain?

**RB:** If you look back to the late 1970s, when the RCLB began, there was a strong sense that capitalism was in deep trouble. There was also a deep sense of continuity with a revolutionary tradition, which had stretched almost uninterrupted since the time of Marx. Even the first three-quarters of the twentieth century had seen wave after wave of national liberation struggles: World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, World War II, the Chinese revolution, independence movements which forced the liquidation of colonial empires, the radical protest movements of 1968, the Cultural Revolution in China, the collapse of the 'postwar boom' leaving capitalism locked in interminable structural crisis throughout the 1970s, followed by the US's defeat in Vietnam in 1975. In Britain, the Tories and Labour had alternated in trying vainly to manage an economic-social crisis to which there seemed no obvious solution. We used the word 'crisis' a lot at the time!

The circumstances therefore seemed favourable for socialists to offer an alternative and take humanity forward from the ruins of the capitalist epoch. So what was stopping this? While our sense of continuity with the Left's heroic traditions was strong, we were also aware that serious errors had become embedded, not just in the organised labour movement (which had

always tended to collaborate with imperialism), but also the various left trends in Britain at that time.

So we identified our tasks: immerse ourselves in the mass movement, and understand the world in the process of striving to change it; and at the same time, analyse the errors in politics and world-view which were holding back a radical anti-imperialist alternative. Obviously, these two tasks were indissolubly linked. The social reality we wanted to understand and change was that of our own country, so this was always the primary point of reference.

In retrospect, we can say capitalism has revealed itself to be more resilient than it seemed at the time. Using the twin evils of neo-liberalism and globalisation, it found a way to unleash a fresh wave of frenzied development at the expense of immense harm to the planet, to the working class, and to humanity's prospects for survival. In Britain, this was initiated by the Thatcher government from 1979.

But, although capitalism was ultimately to emerge stronger from the 1980s, at the time it was anything but secure. This was a period of very intense and multi-faceted struggle, during which capitalism and imperialism was often on the defensive. In Britain, there were the inner-city uprisings against racism and in defence of communities, mass struggles against fascist organisations, campaigns against deportations, the miners' strike, acute struggles in Ireland including the epic Republican hunger strike, liberation struggles in Southern Africa, etc. etc., and many points of contact and mutual support between all these. I'm very happy that Marxist-Leninists did some excellent work in solidarity with all these movements. The theoretical side – and in particular the work which led to *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement* – was always inseparable from our deep involvement in these realities.

Looking back from today's standpoint, although it's true that capitalism went through a period of dynamism from about 1980–2008, this was always on shaky and unsustainable foundations, and the fundamental weaknesses and contradictions remain. In an important sense, the crumbling basis of capitalism is the ecology, and in fact the costs of capitalism's expansion have always been met by the environment (e.g., Thatcherism was entirely funded by North Sea oil!). We didn't really understand this dimension at the time, which was probably the biggest gap in our analysis.

**AH:** What was the significance of 'Eurocentrism' as an analytical lens for understanding the development of the Marxist tradition?

**RB:** We saw ourselves as heirs of the Left tradition, and this carried with it a huge responsibility. While the history was glorious, it also included grave errors, which led to great evils and abuses (for example in the USSR after Lenin's death). We had to be completely honest, and openly expose those errors and correct them, otherwise we'd simply relive them.

Lenin's work offers an important guide in understanding and critiquing the corrupting influence of imperialism. He explained how complicity, and even actually *sharing the spoils* of imperialist exploitation, was a root cause of the left's degeneration. The value of Lenin's work has not diminished in this sense.

However, while the theory of imperialism remains important (and I've consistently used it in my writing on contemporary issues), its accepted form is dangerously insufficient. It was only our solidarity with, and learning from, Black struggles (in Britain itself, as well as in the oppressed nations) which opened us up to this issue. To put it bluntly, the issue of racism was never taken seriously, or in fact barely noticed. Conventionally, imperialism is supposed to have begun around 1900, and this sweeps under the carpet the fundamental historical issues of colonial destruction of indigenous societies and cultures reaching back to the origins of capitalism, and in particular the slave trade. By keeping quiet on these issues, the left effectively made itself an accomplice.

Eurocentrism is really the same as racism, it's simply that, by using this term, we highlight some important ways this manifests itself: the sense that the white world is the most dynamic, and leading, force in world history. Such a perception was deeply embedded in the Left movement, under the guise that the industrial proletariat is the most advanced class, whose supposed triumph will drag the 'backward' nations in its wake.

I should just add a point which doesn't come up directly in your questions, but obviously imperialism oppresses nations internally, as well as externally. The Irish question, which was key to a large part of our efforts in the RCLB at the time, links together both internal and external dimensions, while the dominance over Wales and Scotland is also a fundamental issue in understanding the roots of imperialism in deep time. And of course, the country's working class, and population more generally, is intrinsically multi-national. While in this interview we are extensively discussing racism, we must also recognise that this has a dimension of suppressing *national* cultures and traditions. The RCLB's debates aimed at generating a political

line and practical programme of solidarity, and were very centrally concerned with these issues.

**AH:** How did the RCLB view the Labour Party in relation to the anti-imperialist struggles?

**RB:** Our position was roughly as follows. Historically, Labour was a vehicle of imperialism and at best merely glossed this over with a more ‘enlightened’ veneer; the post-1945 Labour government, though somewhat radical on a domestic front, was savagely oppressing movements in Malaysia, Kenya etc. Subsequently, the ‘West’ (i.e. NATO), under US leadership, switched to *neo*-colonialism, which means dominating the South indirectly through subservient regimes and economic control, and this was promoted equally by Labour and Tory governments. On the question of Ireland – which was enormously important at the time we are discussing – there was virtually no difference.

On a domestic front, particularly under the Wilson-Callaghan governments which immediately preceded Thatcher, Marxist-Leninists often referred to Labour as the ‘best bosses’ party’ – precisely because it was able to mobilise its links with the bureaucratised trade union movement to neutralise resistance, something which was more difficult for Tories. Of course, once Thatcher came in, the Tories were the enemy over a long period; but still, Labour never really developed any line which could explain or effectively oppose neo-liberalism, or the newer forms of imperialism conveyed by globalisation.

There’s nothing in Marxism which says you can’t tactically back some mainstream party in a temporary situation of overwhelming importance. But in the circumstances of that time, backing Labour would have contradicted exactly what we thought should be done, which was make a clean break with that approach. And in general, we felt it was much more important to concentrate our energies on the mass movement rather than electoral politics.

In this, it was essential not to be sectarian and we were always very ready to unite with other groups to further progressive causes. For instance, there was at the time a big threat from extreme right-wing groups (the National Front, and subsequently BNP) and we joined with many on the left in fighting this while continuing to uphold our own position – which was that you must never *reduce* racism to these fascist groups, which were merely a particular manifestation of something structurally embedded throughout imperialist society.

If we interpret imperialism to include the rise of parasitic finance capital, then from my standpoint in London today, what I see is Labour in local government hand-in-glove with developers in profiting from an agenda to liquidate social housing and with it any possibility for the ordinary people to exist in the city, effectively a class war on imperialism's behalf. Lenin's point about sharing in the spoils still makes sense!

**AH:** What has it meant within the British left to be pro-China, and how has this changed over time?

**RB:** Just a point I should make here. You use the term 'Maoism', and I am quite OK with this, in that we looked up to Mao Zedong for his role in the immense historical event which was the Chinese Communist Revolution, and because there is great stuff in his published work. However, we didn't use the term ourselves, which in fact carried some implications from the bad aspect of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, particularly in the late 1960s. We identified as Marxist-Leninist (ML), part of an international movement for a forward-looking regeneration of radical politics, which was at the same time a peeling back to a radical tradition which the mainstream left had lost sight of. To reiterate, our reference point was always the struggle in our own country, and in this context, we identified for example with the nineteenth century Chartists, and sometimes signed our statements 'William Cuffay', adopting the name of the Black former slave who was one of their key leaders.

But of course, we were happy that the Chinese had initiated a current of regeneration in the left in all countries, and it was a great encouragement to feel part of an *international* ML movement. We received publications from ML parties all over the world and studied their experience. This linked with Marx's position that the movement is national in form, but international in essence – a point which still totally remains valid.

Insofar as we were 'following' China, this also had a positive aspect, in that it was a blow against Eurocentrism if we accepted a creative impetus emanating from an area of the global South (the term we tended to use then was the Third World, i.e. the countries who had been victimised by imperialism and racism).

I could also discuss this question in a less formalistic and more human perspective. China was thrilling and creative and vibrant and full of energy. I was lucky to visit there in the late seventies, and the spirit and vibe was intoxicating. Also, the sense of building something *new* was never a

repudiation of the long history of human creativity. You could see a rich indigenous cultural tradition which was now being opened up for the first time to the working class, rather than an elite. Very early in the morning in the Forbidden City (a former imperial palace converted into a public park), you could see ordinary citizens practising taijiquan or traditional flute-playing or Chinese opera songs. And this tradition contained quite a lot of spiritual and meditative aspects which I think are really important in rediscovering the indigenous perspectives which can heal humanity's rift from the natural world. Again, these kinds of issues to do with ecology and wellbeing, although never explicit in the RCLB's political line, were nevertheless things I began to understand through the critique of Eurocentrism.

The contrast was intense with Soviet-dominated East Europe where there was nothing to excite people, with a result that many yearned to imitate the West with its consumer goods and apparent freedom; and it's worth noting that the authorities were putting a lot of effort into policing the borders of the Soviet bloc to stop the population leaving. Of course we can say that the West was able to offer these material attractions because of its imperialist exploitation over the rest of the world, which is certainly true. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Soviet-style system wasn't building anything which could capture the imagination and make people want to participate. There was no sense of a *project*; China in contrast was a lot poorer economically then, but people were fired up by the sense of building a new society. I think this notion of 'project' is really relevant if we are looking at how we articulate socialism today.

So there is a certain sense that the Sino-Soviet split represented the living versus the decayed aspects of socialism, the vibrant sense of 'tradition' versus the dead one.

Another historical factor in igniting the regeneration of the left was China's Cultural Revolution, which ran from about the late sixties and into the seventies. The purpose of this movement was to seek a way to *maintain* socialism on a vital and creative path, and stop it getting bogged down in stagnancy. In the manner that this actually developed in China, it generated a lot of errors (hero-worship, dogmatism etc.), which contributed to getting the concept a bad name. Nevertheless, if we make our own analysis of 'cultural revolution' (with small letters), I think it has a lot of vital implications which remain central to our project today, one which places ecology at the centre and decisively challenges racism and sexism. Society needs a cultural reboot of a very profound kind. This is the point made by the movement around



MeToo, Black Lives Matter etc. Actually, in the RCLB, I could say in retrospect that we did initiate a kind of cultural revolution against racism and sexism, even though neither of these issues was in any way included in the Chinese version!

**AH:** In his book on the North American ‘New Communist Movement’, Max Elbaum has argued that the Sino-Soviet split had an overwhelmingly negative impact, leading to mutually-damaging policies in Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, while submerging a more ‘multipolar’ anti-imperialism, symbolised by the Tricontinental Conference. Is this a fair assessment?

**RB:** This is a very interesting question. Let’s try to unpick what is quite a complex issue.

In Soviet strategy, developed in the 1960s–70s, there was quite a dodgy – and I would have to say dangerous – scenario, in which domestic revolution (within both imperialist and neo-colonial countries) was subordinated to the US-Soviet power balance. The point was not to rock the boat by struggling too vigorously; instead you should just bide your time, because everything would soon work out once the USSR triumphed over the West in economic competition. The assumption was that Soviet-type society would demonstrate its superiority over capitalism and that at some point capitalism would simply throw up its hands and say, *OK, we’re beaten, we give in.*

The *economic* foundation of this argument was totally unconvincing. The reason given for the alleged triumph of the Soviet system is that it was rational and centrally planned. But central planning, even though it may have a certain role, has never been the main criterion of socialism. And in fact, the quest for complete predictability is conceptually the antithesis of a socialist project which should on the contrary be edgy, thrilling, open to the unexpected. We need a decentralised society which can develop many nodes and zones of creativity, which defy rigid categories.

And even more, the basis in international politics was equally wrong. The notion that imperialism – i.e. capitalism viewed as an organised and *military* system – would simply throw in its hand, is beyond absurd.

The Chinese position was that Third World peoples should not be subordinated to such a Eurocentric, and moreover ridiculous, scenario, and should instead be free to struggle against imperialist exploitation. At the same time, the Chinese also felt obliged to critique this argument with respect to Europe itself. An important part of their earlier polemic (in the sixties) was against the leadership of the Italian Communist Party, who

naively thought the imperialists would sit back and allow them to take power. You would have to say, the Chinese were proved completely correct: it's now clear that the right-wing and pseudo-left-wing terrorism unleashed in Italy in the 1970s was part of a NATO-initiated contingency plan, in collaboration with the Italian establishment.

For all these reasons, it's important to recognise that China *did not provoke the showdown* with the pro-Soviet camp, they simply responded to what they saw – correctly – as a dangerous precipice towards which the Soviets and their Eurocentric and bureaucratic followers were pushing the world's people.

Having said all of the above, we must indeed recognise that the situation was very badly handled from a tactical angle, which also made it quite easy for the Soviets to pretend that the split was China's fault. The unity of the Third World should have been preserved. Instead, the unity spirit of the Bandung Conference of 1955 was lost very quickly, and this made it easy for imperialism to deploy divide and rule policies, thereby decisively facilitating the imposition of neo-colonialism in the newly independent former colonies. For example, the conflict between India and Pakistan was undoubtedly entrenched by the Sino-Soviet split, and its legacy is still with us today, greatly facilitating the rise of reactionary nationalism. So in this respect, there is certainly some substance in the assessment to which you refer.

For a time, the Chinese were even arguing that the USSR was itself imperialist in a full sense; but the RCLB to its credit didn't get bogged down in this issue, because it was always felt that our main responsibility to the international movement was to resist British imperialism, including of course its NATO allies.

**AH:** In *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement* you identify some limitations of 'anti-revisionism' as an organising principle, in which the desire to restore an untainted, 'pure' Marxism often led to the retrenchment of orthodoxy. Was this the case with the RCLB?

**RB:** The Chinese Cultural Revolution reasserted a strong sense of *struggle*, as the way to arrive at a correct political line. They didn't invent this, because it went back to the earlier time of Marx and Lenin who devoted much of their energies to polemics against other Left trends. Revisionism essentially means accepting the norms of imperialist society and working within them, which would inevitably shade off into living off crumbs from the imperialist banquet. 'Struggle' against this line is the antithesis of

liberalism (which would lead to eclectic and unprincipled compromise). This whole way of thinking was enormously important in the Revolutionary Communist League.

On a positive side, struggle presupposes a certain democracy in that different opinions would need to be free to assert themselves. This was exactly the case in Marx and Lenin's time. Once the Bolsheviks seized power, however, there was the possibility of *imposing* a line. Lenin resisted this, but under Stalin a tendency emerged to kill or repress those who disagreed, and although this was mitigated under subsequent Soviet leaderships, the principle of democratic participation remained compromised. This is an important reason why mainstream communism failed to renew itself and could offer little resistance – in terms of creativity – in the face of the imperialist onslaught of the 1980s.

In the history of the RCLB, there's a lot we would have to affirm in the notion of struggle over political line. As individuals we had entered into this experiment thoroughly imbued with ideas from class and imperialist society, and it was only through struggle over line that we could possibly have achieved what was after all significant progress in highlighting and opposing racism and sexism. On the basis of this achievement, we were able to take our political line into new territory which went beyond the old debates, so I wouldn't see it as entrenching orthodoxy in some backward-looking way. In fact, *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement* contains the germ of some very interesting links between anti-imperialism and eco-centric and non-binary perspectives.

Nevertheless, there was also something restrictive in the way we understood 'struggle', which actually inhibited such creative developments.

If we are striving to build a movement for the long term, we would have to look at issues of *care*. Marxist-Leninists used to speak a lot about ideological 'remoulding', without realising this is a sensitive issue with a lot of dimensions of psychology. We are whole human beings, and it's impossible to isolate some political or ideological faculty and treat it as separate from the rest of our existence. The binary opposition between politics and ourselves, as humans, is unhealthy and antithetical to wellbeing. It's only by revealing, and correcting, these errors, that we can really open ourselves to absorbing the lessons from indigenous perspectives, feminism, queer reflection on the body, and of course nature/ecology as the indispensable context for our existence. Today, we have a much stronger and

more multi-faceted apparatus with which to approach the task of building revolutionary organisations.

In this reflection, it seems I keep confronting the notion of ‘culture’. Let’s relate this to my actual experience in the RCLB in terms of anti-imperialist solidarity. In my case, based in London, we were working a lot with Pan-Africanist and other Black liberation struggles and became very close personally as well as politically. The centrality of culture really became clear in this context. I think the imperialist project is partly about forging a stunted humanity (cyborg soldiers and administrators) in which any caring faculty has been neutered. In contrast, the liberation movements made culture central, because it’s a way of liberating the whole human being, in the framework of our relation to the natural world. During the 1980s, I was also a musician, and through this it became clear that politics and culture were inseparable. At one point (using my carpentry skills) we were exploring traditional African techniques of instrument-making, and the connection with the natural world was a real eye-opener (the use of gourds as resonators, or spiders’ web to set up sympathetic vibrations). My friend the late Cheikh Ahmed Gueye (to whom I pay tribute in the introduction to *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement*) wrote a poem ‘I am one with nature’, which makes the point really well.

So there were definitely ways in which anti-revisionism led – via a creative rediscovery of anti-imperialism – to some levels of understanding which are the antithesis of a dull orthodoxy.

**AH:** Another distinguishing feature of the RCLB was the attention it gave to the issue of gender oppression, and particularly its receptivity to ‘Third World’ feminisms. How was women’s liberation viewed in relation to the wider class struggle, and to what extent were feminist critiques successfully internalised by the group?

**RB:** When we began seeking a political line, our point of departure was probably what we saw, conventionally, as the need for a ‘class analysis’. Then, the next step came when we realised we must see the working class in a way radically different from the white, male stereotype of the mainstream labour movement. In this respect, we took on board the feminist critique of the household, the economic definition of ‘reproduction’ etc. All this was great, but it would be incomplete, or even reactionary, to leave the argument at this point. Male dominance is also an issue of power, violence and ingrained norms of society. It’s to the RCLB’s credit that we were able to make the progression through these various levels of understanding. Such

was the importance we attributed to these issues, that we established an all-female central leadership. These are major achievements.

Despite these strengths, from today's standpoint we might see the issue in a deeper way. For example, it seems surprising that our dedication to taking on board gender was not accompanied by any perspective on LGBT+ issues. Perhaps this is a clue that our line on gender was quite limited by binary perspectives.

Challenging these would open us up to a different way of seeing the world, and would also open us to indigenous voices and world-views. In fact, our line in the RCLB had nothing to say about the environment (which seems really strange from today's perspective!). Ecofeminist, queer, indigenous and non-binary perspectives would critique the basis of our separation or alienation from the natural world, and link together issues of care, both for the ecology and for each other. The great perspectives which emerged from these areas of consciousness actually anticipated a lot of the issues which have come to the fore most recently with the pandemic, and can be of great significance in developing socialist responses.

**AH:** A key element of the philosophy of Maoism was the need for intellectuals to become integrated with the labouring classes. What was the reasoning behind this, and how was it applied within the urban British context?

**RB:** Contrary to what is often assumed, we weren't all students! There was a strong working-class presence in the ML movement in Britain. The core was very much in the industrial Midlands and North, and London-based comrades were always travelling up there for various activities – which was great.

There was also a policy that it would be good for intellectual comrades to enter working-class jobs. This was partly because of an organisational commitment to industrial base-building but, also, there was certainly an element of ideological remoulding. I decided to work in the construction industry which was then thriving – and hiring – in London (unlike manufacturing which was already in decline, although there were still important factories like Fords in Dagenham where other comrades worked). At that time, there was a shortage of skilled labour in construction, and government-run Skillcentres were offering intensive courses which were actually excellent. In my case, I trained to be a carpenter.

Building sites were quite a major arena of class struggle at the time, with all sorts of union-busting tactics deployed by the big firms in collaboration with

the Tories, so it was an interesting environment to be plunged into. In fact, I worked in this industry for 10 years – essentially the whole of the eighties – and I must say I loved nearly every minute and the experience transformed my life. Alongside the anti-imperialist solidarity and all the friends I made there, industrial work is certainly the aspect of Maoism which made the biggest impact personally. I should add that as a carpenter I worked for several years for a local authority doing repairs and maintenance in social housing, and was enormously privileged to become part of this multi-ethnic working class community in inner London; and through this gained a lot of insight about the repressive and bureaucratic role of the state apparatus at its most local level, and its contempt for people's livelihoods. Imperialism runs deep.

Looking back from today's standpoint, I'd like to pick up on another aspect of 'cultural revolution', which in this case is something directly related to the Chinese experience: dissolving the difference between mental and manual labour. In Marx's early writing in the 1840s, he posed a question: 'What does it mean to be human?' This referenced a concept, much debated at the time, which can be translated as 'species-being' or 'the human essence'. Marx's view (the theory of evolution wasn't established yet, but in a way he anticipated it!) was that humanity developed through a constant iterative process where we conceptualise the world by and through a process of learning skills to transform it, evolving both our hands and our brain in tandem, so theory and skill couldn't be separated. When I encountered Maoism I was an intellectual, but would probably have become a really lousy one. As I proceeded to master a manual skill, I began, by the same process, to conceive the project of writing a different kind of book, one which might have come from a sort of 'skillcentre' addressing the conceptual and practical world of anti-imperialism. This formed the basis of *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement*, and my subsequent books.

**AH:** Have the political ideas expressed in *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement* informed your more recent work around environmental justice?

**RB:** As I was researching for the *Eurocentrism* book – when the British Library was still in the British Museum, basically unchanged from Marx's time – and reading hands-on the works of the old imperialists of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, I gradually began to realise how explicit ecology was in imperialist thought and practice. They understood perfectly well that natural resources are finite, which is precisely why they sought to grab them for themselves; they understood that indigenous people were living in harmony with nature and sustainably managing its resources,

and that's precisely why they wished to exterminate them. So you can kind of see, in *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement*, the inkling of a notion that the foundations of an *anti-imperialism* must be ecological and pro-indigenous. This is something which the mainstream communist movement – including Maoism – never grasped. It's this insight that I continued to develop in my subsequent work and teaching.

As soon as I came across Carolyn Merchant's book *The Death of Nature* (first published in 1980), I immediately saw that the ecofeminist perspective was a kind of parallel line of argument to the critique of Eurocentrism. She'd done something similar to the Africanist scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois and Cheikh Anta Diop, in uncovering a whole strand of history which the mainstream suppressed, and which forces us to rethink our relations to the world. So when University College London gave me the opportunity to teach Political Ecology, I developed the course on this basis.

My research about the early imperialists also provided an inkling that their project involved conducting a kind of social/genetic engineering upon the metropolitan populations themselves: in order to dominate supposedly inferior 'races', they must construct a master race who had purged themselves of humanity or care. I knew that UCL had been implicated in this evil project (it's politely known as eugenics, but we can better call it pseudo-scientific racism), and when I joined the university I was surprised to see that the figures who propagated this were still revered. So I developed the course to critique this.

At the same time, I wanted to demarcate myself from a fashionable post-modern kind of anti-Eurocentrism which is mainly about sounding clever, so I needed to get back to what I learned at first hand from liberation fighters, who had put their lives on the line in working for change. This is again a kind of cultural revolution, in the sense I mentioned earlier, so I tried to introduce a missing Black element into Political Ecology (using Walter Rodney and Bob Marley as teaching materials for instance).

Political Ecology, like the socialist project in general, is about being conscious of our responsibilities right now, poised between past and future. We need to understand our heritage, for good and bad, and the deep tradition of that strand within the human story which resists the alienation conducted by class society. And from this standpoint, we need to free the imagination. There is currently some interesting work around creating infrastructures for collective imagination. Indigenous cultures, for example in North America, are non-binary and gender-fluid, and this is precisely what has enabled them,

over millennia, to think (dream) outside the box, and surmount immense challenges to environmental change. Similarly, Afro-futurism is a trend which is very much rooted in this dialectic between deep tradition and an emancipated vision of the possibilities of progressive change. So I have tried to make these elements central to my course.

Coming back to our earlier discussion about tactics, we currently face a lot of *immediate* challenges, notably with respect to the environment. In the spirit of Lenin's '*Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, we must be prepared for alliances and compromises with different forces around some key issues, and Political Ecology, in an applied sense, could be part of this. But we can only do this in a principled way if the strategic vision is clear.

**AH:** What do you think are the main lessons that today's left should take from the Maoist experience?

**RB:** I think there's still something inspiring in Mao's quotations: about things like 'dare to struggle, dare to win', 'serve the people', correct ideas emerging from practice, the people being the motive force in history, seeking truth from facts.

The idea of social investigation is an important principle, which comes directly out of the Maoist tradition. I was chatting recently to a US group who got in touch because of my books, and I was impressed by their emphasis on rediscovering this approach, and really trying to explore deeply what is going on in society. In the RCLB, it was really important that we had this commitment to developing a *programme*; it's that which really pushed us to struggle and resolve issues of line, and bring to fruition the rethink which opened up all these issues around gender, racism and the national question.

Actually, in this respect the Maoist tradition has never disappeared. On the surface it's less visible, but maybe that's because it's done something which is actually really important, by diffusing itself within mass movements.

As an illustration, I'd like to pay tribute to my friend and comrade, Aziz Choudry whom I met 20 years ago through one of the later incarnations of the ML movement, and who sadly died prematurely this year. He wrote and edited a lot of fantastic books, which you can easily search on the Web. This work developed a methodology of 'activist scholarship', which revealed a whole universe of social movements, which are themselves developing the knowledge that we need for the next stage of struggle: indigenous/First Nations movements, LGBTQ and non-binary liberation, feminism, environmental justice; and also all the class-struggle issues which fuse with



issues of imperialism and national oppression and highlight the working class as it *really* is, i.e. care-givers, workers in the new industries spawned by neo-liberal and global forms of capitalism who are heavily determined by race and national descent, all the struggles within the new algorithm-driven and outsourced forms of exploitation, and movements to build a new, radical trade unionism propelled by the marginalised sectors. Moreover, these struggles span the whole globe. So this can give us confidence that we are part of a historic current of renewal.

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Robert Biel lives in Brixton, South London, an area famous for its uprisings in the 1980s, and more recently for struggles in defence of social housing against predatory capital. Having worked at times as delivery driver, cook, musician and actor, Robert qualified as a carpenter and worked in various aspects of the profession, notably the direct labour organisation of Lambeth council, where he chaired the shop stewards' committee for all manual trades. More recently, he has been doing some lecturing in various colleges of London University, and currently in UCL. Robert would probably now mainly identify as a writer: *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement* (the main focus of this interview) initiated a project which subsequently led to *The New Imperialism* and *The Entropy of Capitalism*. Through these books, one can trace an increasing focus on the ecology, a theme certainly present in Marx' work, but too long neglected in the Left movement. Concretising this, Robert is a keen food grower, practitioner of agroecology and participant in the allotment movement, with whose traditions he strongly identifies. These experiences gave rise to his latest open-access book, *Sustainable Food Systems*.