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## **Interview with Professor Craig Brandist**

**Interviewer: Dr. Paromita Chakrabarti**

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,  
HR College, University of Mumbai**

Craig Brandist was born in Coventry, UK, in 1963. He completed a PhD on the sources of the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle at the University of Sussex in 1995, after which he was Max Hayward Fellow in Russian Literature at St. Antony's College, Oxford. In 1997 he became Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield where, in 2007, he became Professor of Cultural Theory and Intellectual History and, from 2008, Director of the Bakhtin Centre. Professor Brandist has published widely on Russian literature, intellectual history and critical thought, with his books including *Carnival Culture and the Soviet Modernist Novel* (1996), *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (2002), (ed. with David Shepherd and Galin Tihanov) *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (2004) and (ed. with Katya Chown) *Politics and the Theory of Language in the USSR 1917-1938* (2010). He is currently working with Peter Thomas (Brunel University) on a book about Antonio Gramsci's time in the USSR (1922-5), based on archival research in Moscow, and on a new monograph about the critique of Indo-European philology in Revolutionary Russia.

He has just published the book *The Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* which is available now.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Brandist is also President of the lecturers' union (UCU) at the University of Sheffield, and a photographer.

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<sup>1</sup> For information see: <http://www.brill.com/products/book/dimensions-hegemony>

This interview is primarily to understand Bakhtin's ideas, his reception in India, the work that is done at The Bakhtin Centre, University of Sheffield, and to engage with an internationally renowned scholar of Bakhtin Studies. The interview will also cover new dimensions of research on Gramsci and his ideas of Hegemony and a discussion on Indo-European philology which can provide an alternate paradigm to study the Postcolonial.

**1. As a Professor of Cultural Theory and Intellectual History at the University of Sheffield could you briefly tell me about your research interests?**

I'm interested in the way in which the revolutionary era in Russia and the USSR, by which I mean the first third of the 20th century, led to a fundamental shift in our understanding of the social world. This is a process that has largely been obscured, first by the legacy of the twin disasters of Stalinism and Fascism in Europe, then by the intellectual consequences of the Cold War, in which the Stalin and post-Stalin regimes were presented as 'socialist' and logical outcomes of Marxism. This problem has, more recently, been exacerbated by the ideologies of neoliberalism and postmodernism, which are dialectically linked. One of the more pernicious effects of the latter is that it has gained the status of what Thomas Kuhn called 'normal science', when researchers take for granted some past theoretical innovation, and concentrate on what Kuhn called 'puzzle-solving'. Like nation states, once established such traditions construct for themselves a historical mythology that portrays its origins in the light of what it regards as its accomplishments.

One consequence is a caricature of history and the science of the past which, in the case of postmodernism, involves a misrepresentation of the Enlightenment. If we take Voltaire's *Candide*, one of the most popular texts of the Enlightenment, as an example, we can see nothing resembling the abstract, Eurocentric universalism based on the rationalistic assumption of scientific certainty that the postmodern image of the movement suggests. Nor indeed can we see an essentially religious confidence in the inevitability of historical progress. This 'straw man' image is nevertheless passed on to graduate students through textbooks and Masters' courses.

Marxism is often portrayed as the epitome of this putative 'Enlightenment thinking', but this massively underestimates the variety of critical scholarship that emerged in the early USSR, as a result of both the conceptual shifts of the time and the funding for innovative research projects associated with egalitarian social policies. Among the paradigms that emerged were what are now call sociolinguistics and the post-colonial critique of scholarship about the 'East'. The caricature of the period has not only deprived recent scholarship of important critical and political resources, but has led to a reliance on Nietzschean and Heideggerian ideas, anti-democratic philosophers who posited European culture as the achievement of Ancient Greece, with no debts to Pharaonic Egypt or Persia.<sup>2</sup> I'm therefore interested in researching the intellectual riches of revolutionary Russia as a resource for addressing contemporary social and political problems. One example would be the way in which the Revolution created an environment in which religious sectarianism and fundamentalism were undermined, while the political and economic

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<sup>2</sup> An excellent discussion of this runs throughout Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

reasons for the appeal of such ideas were addressed through progressive policies that led to the advancement of the oppressed and exploited.

**2.. You have several publications on Bakhtin and you are internationally renowned as a prominent Bakhtin scholar. What do you think about the rising interest in Bakhtin and his ideas in recent times?**

I was first attracted to the ideas of what we now call the ‘Bakhtin Circle’ because, as a graduate student in the late 1980s, these works appeared to address the legitimate issues raised by poststructuralist thinkers without yielding to an irresponsible relativism that ultimately renders all collective politics impossible. Indeed, I’ve always thought that the postmodern agenda was primarily ideological cover for intellectuals seeking to withdraw from collective politics.<sup>3</sup> More conservative thinkers found in Bakhtin’s ideas a way to defend liberal humanism against the intellectual assault on the bourgeois subject by poststructuralist thinkers. This is perhaps an indication of the extent to which Bakhtinian ideas can be marshalled in the cause of very different ideological agendas, and applied to a wide range of cultural phenomena in critical analyses. In order to understand why this is possible one needs to have an adequate historical understanding of the sources of the ideas and, arising from this, a diagnosis of what makes their employment alternately penetrating and superficial. Categories like ‘dialogue’ and ‘carnival’ are applied so casually that they tend to lose their critical potential and become largely trivial. This is a pity because properly understood and cautiously applied they may have significant critical power.

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<sup>3</sup> Here I broadly agree with Alex Callinicos’s argument in his polemical *Against Postmodernism* (London: Polity 1989), though it is important to recognise the intellectual ‘surplus’ that is irreducible to this motivation.

So the answer to the question is that intelligent researchers recognise the potential power of certain ‘Bakhtinian’ ideas, and seek to apply them to a range of cultural phenomena, but they are often unaware of the conceptual structures on which they are founded. This may lead to a naive employment of the ideas, without understanding the potentials and limitations of the ideas, not least the separation of semiotic material from the institutions in which their use is always embedded. The result is often (though by no means always) a formalistic or superficial application of the ideas that yields few novelties. In this sense ‘Bakhtinian’ categories may become part of ‘normal science’, treating cultural phenomena as a puzzle to be solved by the application of the categories themselves.

Fortunately the high point of such uncritical and mechanical applications has probably passed.

**3. You have been the director of the Bakhtin centre at the University of Sheffield since 2008. I would like to know what kind of work the centre does and what are the opportunities for research at the Centre for scholars specializing on Bakhtin or working with Bakhtinian ideas?**

David Shepherd founded the Centre in 1994 to study the sources and legacy of the ideas of the ‘Bakhtin Circle’. I was originally the research assistant brought in to work on new translations and to research the sources of the ideas from 1997, and my role has developed significantly in the meantime. Here I built on my doctoral work which was dedicated to the sources of the ideas of the Circle, resulting in a number of articles and books on the subject. Together we coordinated and participated in research projects on various aspects of the Circle’s work that have helped to bring about a greater historical understanding, and more circumspect

application of the ideas than was common in the 1980s and 1990s. We also aimed to bring researchers into dialogue with each other to develop productive approaches to the ideas.

Over time, however, it became clear that the members of the Circle were participants in a wider dialogue that was much more important than the contributions of any of the individuals involved. They appeared truly exceptional only because the wider intellectual debates of the time remained obscure. Over time, therefore, the Centre broadened its focus to consider the history of cultural theory, with particular reference to that developed in the early Soviet Union. The Bakhtin Circle remains a significant part of this, of course. One achievement of which I am particularly proud is the construction of a special research collection through many hours of trawling through bookshops in Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and elsewhere. We now have a focused collection of material on the field that would be difficult to compare with anywhere else in Europe. This collection is accessible to visiting researchers and graduate students in pursuit of their research. Consultation on and supervision of related research projects is also available to resident and visiting scholars and graduate students.

#### **4. What do you think of Bakhtin's reception in India?**

I can only really judge the material in English that has been available to me, and so I can't claim an exhaustive knowledge of this. What I would say is that I have seen examples of imaginative, and careful applications that serve to cast new light on cultural phenomena and simultaneously illuminate some of the potentials and limitations in Bakhtinian ideas. However, I've also seen examples of mechanical applications in which

the phenomenon under scrutiny is forced to lie on a Procrustean bed of Bakhtinian categories. This is by no means unique to the Indian context, for certain Bakhtinian ideas are all too easy to employ incautiously and uncritically, and there are plenty of examples from around the world of thinkers being regarded as a panacea.

The fortunate thing is that there is a certain privilege in coming to these ideas relatively late, compared to Europe and the US, since Indian scholars have the opportunity to learn from our mistakes rather than repeating them. This means, however, a readiness to take history seriously, both intellectual history and the history of institutions and social structures. The imperatives of neo-liberalism within universities discourages such investigations, as researchers are pressed to predict results, claim novelties and to prioritise productivity. In these circumstances an insistence on the importance of history has a subversive edge and requires a way of working that goes against the grain of the easiest forms of intellectual practice.

India has a long and proud tradition of historical and philological investigations that ran against the dogmas of the ruling ideology in colonial times and after. In recent times this is endangered by a resurgence of sectarian and authoritarian myths that seek to overwhelm critical thinking. It would be good to think that certain Bakhtinian ideas, suitably revised and reformulated, would play a role in the cause of critical thinking today.

**5. Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas like the carnivalesque, dialogism, heteroglossia, grotesque, has been used by literary critics and scholars worldwide. What in your opinion are the most productive**

**ways in which Bakhtinian concepts can be used across disciplines?  
Are they applied to disciplinary fields other than humanities and  
social sciences?**

I think the idealist foundations of Bakhtin's ideas need to be recognised from the outset - meaning not that he denied the existence of the material world, but that he consistently tried to dissolve the structures of experience into those of consciousness. He separates forms of consciousness from the material conditions from which they emerge, and cultural forms float free of the institutional moorings in which they should be embedded. This perhaps sounds more negative than it should, for there is a sense in which to escape the reductionist 'Marxism' of Stalin's Russia he needed to do this in order to engage in a properly critical manner. We don't need to do this, however, and so I think we can make the best use of these categories if we embed the phenomena they denote into social structures and processes and refuse to separate the human from the natural sciences in the way that Bakhtin did. It is this separation that has allowed his most famous and appealing categories to be overused and misapplied. Also, the contradictions and tensions in Bakhtin's ideas need to be recognised and addressed directly, for these open a space for rethinking the ideas themselves in order to make them more potent tools of analysis and critique.

I'll just give one example: Bakhtin says dialogue is the existential condition of all language but then talks about monologue. What can this be? It must be a type of dialogue. Understood as such it appears to be a hierarchical relationship between discourses. But then he talks about 'monologic discourse'. It isn't clear how it can be both these things, and we probably need to choose one and develop that perspective.

In terms of the idealism, we probably need to recognise that when Bakhtin insistently talks about the body in writing about carnival he's concerned only with *images of the body*, not with the body as such. Similarly, he values carnival as a form employed by novelists to relativise the ruling ideology, not as a form of popular subversion in itself. The novel, in which this 'carnival spirit' reigns is, for Bakhtin, a form of consciousness, and when he presents the history of the genre it is separated from such crucial institutional preconditions as the rise of a literate middle class and of the publishing industry. I think that if we are to make good use of these ideas we need to reconnect these things. Much better, I think, to treat the cultural forms Bakhtin discusses as emergent structures that arise from the natural and social structures that precede them, but are irreducible to those structures. Once this happens then 'dialogism' as a form of ideology critique, 'heteroglossia' as the registration of socioeconomic institutions in the stratified national language gains a critical traction that they lose in isolation.

In short we need to approach the ideas critically and historically.

**6. Apart from Bakhtin, you have worked on Antonio Gramsci. I am really interested in knowing how you relate Gramsci's ideas to Bakhtin and how do they come together in your work?**

Gramsci was clearly one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the 20th century, and Bakhtin was not a Marxist at all (Voloshinov and Medvedev were Marxists of a sort). Gramsci was a political activist, while members of the Bakhtin Circle were relatively detached 'traditional intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense. Clearly they are not directly commensurable thinkers. They did, however, share some intellectual sources and engaged,

in different ways, with the same ‘dialogising background’. They also shared important elements of an understanding of language as the embodiment of a worldview and the site of ideological struggles. This was fundamentally different to the poststructuralist theory of language, which makes many of the applications of their respective ideas in cultural studies deeply problematic. The understanding of social consciousness as a site of unremitting struggle between socially-positioned groups in which contestation of concepts like ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and the like play a crucial role has always seemed to me an important and productive alternative to ‘false-consciousness’ theories of ideology. While Bakhtin and his colleagues have a sophisticated account of some of these struggles at the level of aesthetics and literature, Gramsci provided a much more ‘grounded’ account at the level of political action and institutions of power.

Apart from being a trained historical linguist, Gramsci’s intellectual formation was fundamentally shaped by his involvement in the proletarian culture movement in Turin and then by the two years he spent in Russia in 1922-3 and a shorter visit in 1925. This gave Gramsci an insight into the crucial debates in Russia at the time. It would be no exaggeration to say that much of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* is made up of his theoretical reflections on this experience, attempting to distil the lessons of the NEP-period USSR into concepts and modes of analyses to guide revolutionary practice in Italy and the rest of Europe.

## **7. Can you tell me something about your recent book *Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia?***

It’s the product of many years of research in Russian, Ukrainian and Azerbaijani archives as well as research work in major Russian libraries

and focuses on the interaction between language and cultural policy in Revolutionary Russia and the wider the intellectual debates of the time. A key concept here is *hegemony*, which entered Russian Marxism to theorise the way in which a minority proletariat could lead the majority of peasants in a democratic revolution against the Tsarist autocracy, but soon became the focus for a wide range of cultural debates and policies. This involved the relationship between the proletariat and peasantry, the cities and countryside, the Russian proletariat and the millions of non-Russian former subjects of the Russian Empire, and the revolutionary state and the liberation movements across the world. I aim to show that considerations of hegemony progressively developed multiple dimensions, with cultural and linguistic issues becoming more prominent over time. This was because communication between the leadership of the Revolution in the cities and the largely illiterate peasantry within Russia required conscious attention to be given to the relationship between the standard and non-standard forms of language. This was, however, a relatively simple matter compared with the fact that the majority population of the former Empire did not speak Russian as a native language, and that most languages did not have standard forms. The Soviet government thereby needed to codify national languages and establish national regions in order to facilitate education and cultural development in the regions, and to enable the indigenous population to participate in public life.

This situation led to a massive investment in research activities into the sociological and political dimensions of language, relations between literature and folklore, nation formation and questions of identity and the like, which were decades ahead of research in the rest of the world. It is impossible to understand the work of people like the Bakhtin Circle, or

the famous psychologist Vygotskii without an appreciation of this wider intellectual field. Moreover, given the central role the early USSR played in the workers' movements in Europe and the anti-colonial movements across the world, the influence of these ideas beyond the USSR also needs to be properly understood. The problem is that the Stalinist counter-revolution distorted these new paradigms almost beyond recognition, the entire political vocabulary was twisted to suit the interests of the new ruling class in its competition with western capital. My argument is that Gramsci was spared some of the worst effects of this distortion by the fact that he was isolated in Mussolini's prison from 1926 and was able to spend the next decade reflecting upon the lessons of the Revolutionary period. Gramsci's ideas therefore need to be understood within this context, but we also need to understand that there were many valuable and related debates of which Gramsci was unaware. The book tries to uncover some of this wider intellectual field.

**8. I believe you are also looking at the development of Indology in revolutionary Russia and exploring the idea of a critique of Orientalism from Russian intellectual history. Can you talk about this exciting area of study?**

Yes, this came out of one of the 'dimensions of hegemony' that I studied in the book. Late imperial orientology (I use this term to avoid the pejorative sense 'orientalism' has gained since Said's famous book of 1978) in Russia developed in opposition to that in Britain and France. Indeed, as Vera Tolz has shown in recent work on the area, orientologists developed a penetrating critique of the entanglement of imperial interests and scholarship about the East in these areas.<sup>4</sup> They particularly concentrated

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<sup>4</sup> Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Soviet Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

on the stereotypes of a rational, dynamic West versus religious and stagnant East, as serving to justify Imperial domination. Instead they developed sophisticated studies of ‘Russia’s own orient’: Central Asia, the Caucasus and Siberia, in which the cultural achievements of these areas were highlighted. Among these areas of research was a study of Buddhism that had spread from India, through Tibet and Mongolia into parts of Siberia. This led to the rise of an Indology that, unlike that in the West, did not restrict itself to the Classical and Vedic periods, but treated Indian (in the broad sense) culture as a living and dynamic phenomenon, and took the achievements of Indian scholars seriously. These orientologists advocated a significant amount of cultural autonomy within the Empire, which the reactionary Tsarist authorities were unwilling to grant. However, they were certainly not advocating an anti-imperialist policy, believing that an appreciative ontology would ultimately help to secure the Empire’s future. The Empire, they believed, should be a shared civic space in which more ‘backward’ areas would achieve progress by being brought under the leadership of the more advanced culture of Russia. As the great historian of Central Asia, Vasilii Bartol’d put it, ‘the peoples of the east will believe in the superiority of our culture all the more when they are convinced we know them better than they know themselves’. In this way, Russian Orientalists could contribute to the ‘peaceful convergence of the peoples of the east with Russia’.<sup>5</sup>

As we all know, the Revolutions of 1917 destroyed the Empire and the Bolsheviks worked to discredit the whole idea. Indeed, after the Revolution it became ever more apparent that the East was a crucial factor in the continuation of the Revolution in Russia and abroad.

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<sup>5</sup> Bartol’d, Vasilii Vladimirovich, ‘Rech’ pered zashchitoi dissertatsii’, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura 1963 [1910]) p. 610.

Although the Bolsheviks clearly understood the importance of anti-colonial movements in the East, most revolutionaries had been focused on Europe as the cradle of revolution as it emerged from the chaos of the 1914-18 war. As the revolutionary wave there ebbed, it was the East that drew more and more attention. Moreover, the ‘national question’ in ‘Russia’s own orient’ demanded urgent attention, and the alliance between Russian revolutionaries and the liberation movements in the former colonies of the Empire was crucial in the defeat of the western-backed White armies in the 1918-21 Civil War. Russia now began to attract significant numbers of Indian revolutionaries, ultimately leading to the formation of the Indian Communist Party.

The point is that in the new circumstances, the late imperial orientologists and the Soviet government began to cooperate, so that the progressive elements of the old orientology were uncoupled from their imperial ideology and integrated into a developing field of Marxist scholarship. The first years of the USSR thus saw a rise in critical and emancipatory scholarship, and the development of a penetrating ideology critique of western *orientalism*. This then interacted with the liberation movements in the British and French colonies as significant numbers of their intellectuals were educated in Soviet institutions or participated in the activities of the Communist International. This relationship suffered severe distortions from the end of the 1920s, with the rise of the Stalin regime that attempted to subordinate non-Russian areas of the USSR to Moscow and use foreign Communist Parties to further its own foreign policy, but the critique nevertheless led to the development of the postcolonial critique of orientalism.

This is not generally understood by advocates of postcolonial theory today, who tend to turn to Nietzschean or Heideggerian philosophy to ground their critique of Eurocentrism, despite the facts that these were among the most elitist, anti-democratic and Eurocentric thinkers of their time. It also does not appear to have been understood by the main advocates of subaltern studies, who fundamentally misunderstand the notion of hegemony, and in some cases end up reinforcing the same orientalist stereotypes they set out to counter.

As a footnote I could add that the Bakhtin Circle at various points included two orientologists: the Japanologist Nikolai Konrad and the Indologist Mikhail Tubianskii. Both these figures deserve more attention not least for their anti-Eurocentric scholarship. Tubianskii was a student of the great Russian Buddhologist Fedor Shcherbatskoi, known in the anglophone world as Theodor Stcherbatsky, a figure who is still widely respected among Indian Buddhologists, especially for his monumental 2-volume study *Buddhist Logic* (1930-32). Tubianskii was, among other things, the leading specialist on the work of Rabindranath Tagore in the USSR. These figures were significant in the emergence of what are not often called 'Bakhtinian theory'.

**9. How does the idea of entanglement of different intellectual traditions appeal to you? I am referring to the particular connections you mentioned in an earlier discussion that early Indian communists made with German and Russian scholars, activists and leaders. Let us talk a bit about the way such connections between people from the east and the west influenced the nationalist struggle for independence from the British Empire and what that history means for the Left movement in postcolonial India.**

This is a very big issue, but I could say that recognition of the intellectual engagement, and often indeed entanglement, between East and West is fundamental in understanding the emergence of the very idea of India. They were, moreover, crucial to the Enlightenment project itself - not least through the European assimilation of Indian and Arab mathematics. This makes it all the more outrageous that the Enlightenment is caricatured in the way it is. The Enlightenment was a *contested* dialogic arena from the outset, and remained so as the ideas became entangled with developing colonialism.<sup>6</sup>

Many ideological positions that legitimised the colonial project were adopted and reworked by anti-colonial intellectuals, not least the idea of the Aryan invasion, and the romantic notion that one can find some primordial basis for nationality. The current Hindu nationalist attempt to pursue the idea that a single Indian people correspond to a single language, based on Sanskrit roots, or that the basis of some ancient greatness can be discerned from the foundational myths of the state are direct borrowings from German Romanticism. The first attempt to implement such ideas was a tragedy, while this attempt, as Marx might have said, is a farce, albeit a dangerous one. It is all the more worrying when intellectuals on the left concede so much ground to such orientalist caricatures as Indian workers are motivated by religion and European workers by the pursuit of their economic well-being. This, along with the treatment of the Enlightenment as essentially a European and colonial project, is to play into the hand of the right wing both in Europe and India.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

The conflation of Marxism with its Stalinist distortion is no less unjust or dangerous in present circumstances. A historical perspective shows that while Marxism exerted a formative influence on the formation of a left intellectual trend in Asia and elsewhere, the participation of Asian revolutionaries in Russia and the Comintern fundamentally affected the ways in which Marxists perceived the world.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Marx himself struggled to free his work from the positivist scientific ideas that were dominant in Europe in the nineteenth century, leading to some fundamental changes in perspective.<sup>8</sup> It was, moreover, interventions based on the Marxist analysis of imperialism that attracted *mujarhirin* and Hindu anti-colonial revolutionaries in the 1920s, enabling the formation of class-based organisation that challenged the communalism that was fundamental to imperial rule. Communalism today plays the same role in facilitating the domination of transnational, corporate capital in India, and Islamophobia is, similarly, of crucial importance in justifying Western intervention in the Middle East, while blaming immigrants for falling living standards among workers in Europe. Just as the domination of capital is a transnational and transregional phenomenon, so must be the formation of oppositional ideas and organisation. We therefore have much to learn from the successes of Marxists in the early twentieth century, but we also need to understand how the movement was destroyed from without and within. These are fundamental tasks of left

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Eric Blanc's work on the way in which organisations in the colonies of the Russian Empire led the Bolsheviks to develop their nationality policy. 'National Liberation and Bolshevism Reexamined: A View From the Borderlands' (2014) available online here: <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/05/20/national-liberation-and-bolshevism-reexamined-a-view-from-the-borderlands/> (accessed 8/2/15).

<sup>8</sup> For a recent discussions see Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

intellectuals today, to study the past to ensure we learn from the successes of the past and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

## **10. Could you comment on the state of university education and critical scholarship today?**

Universities never were and are never going to be the vanguard of revolutionary change, but they have functioned as a space within which radical ideas could circulate and to some extent develop. This is partially due to the insulation of intellectual endeavour from the demands of governmental policy and capital accumulation that the institution facilitates. This has been a perennial concern for right-wing politicians, but hitherto the mainstream pro-capitalist opinion has been that the system as a whole needs a protected space for critical thought and research. This consensus has come under particular pressure as a result of the international project of neoliberalism which, while positing itself as the antithesis of Stalinism, represents a dialectical fusion of market capitalism with Stalinist forms of state organisation. This is, I think, based on the fact that both neo-liberalism and Stalinism are utopian political projects aimed at the complete subjugation of all social institutions to the accumulation of capital. I have written about the way in which the neoliberal agenda has led to features typical of the Stalinist command economy in UK universities and am currently expanding this work into a more extensive analysis.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 'My rallies of endeavour will ensure the impact our dear leaders desire: on the Parallels Between Stalin's Russia and the Operation of Today's Universities', Times Higher Education, 29 May 2014. Available online at:

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/opinion-a-very-stalinist-management-model/2013616.article>

In this environment universities are being transformed into factories for the production of the next generation of managers and of skilled labour, a base for research to facilitate the expansion of private capital, while critical intellectuals are under pressure to become producers of ‘scientific ideologies’ to justify the imperative of capital accumulation. None of this is especially new, but what has changed is the erosion, and in some cases the *de facto* collapse, of the structures that insulated the academic environment from the pressures I mentioned above.

The space for the development of critical scholarship within universities is therefore narrower than once it was, but there is still important work being done. To be effective, however, such work needs, in one way or another, to connect with organisations outside the university structure. This ultimately means critical intellectuals returning to the difficult, messy and conflictual field of collective politics.

**11. As the President of Sheffield Union (UCU) do you see yourself as an organic intellectual? How do you balance teaching, research and activism?**

As someone who came from a working class family and who has been active in political struggles since the 1980s, I was an organic intellectual long before I became president of the union. I credit political engagement with a significant part of my education, and I learned to lecture primarily through the practice of speaking at political events. I took on the presidency because it seemed the best way for me to contribute in my present situation, and it allows me to make connections between my research work and political practice. This was certainly preferable to being pushed into some management role within the university structure,

which would have placed my function and ideological commitments in contradiction. Inevitably, however, trades unionism is a limited, if essential, phenomenon and so political engagement needs to extend beyond its limits.

As for how activism interacts with teaching and research, this depends on the nature of the teaching and publication. When teaching undergraduates it is mainly a matter of helping them to think critically, making them aware that the terminology they have absorbed and have taken for granted ('democracy', 'nation', 'communism' and the like) are deeply ideological and need to be interrogated. It is often a matter of helping them to think historically, to appreciate that not everything in the past simply led inexorably to where we are now. The world could have turned out differently, and could still do so. By its very nature such an understanding raises awareness of the value of critical thinking and engagement in the struggles of the time. None of this stops when teaching graduate students, but there is then the additional need to understand the potential and limitations of certain approaches, and the need to identify areas that still need development. This is fundamental in enabling graduates to make a contribution to knowledge. None of this constitutes advocacy of a particular position, for there is nothing more subversive than critical engagement with institutional and ideological phenomena, which is precisely why the ruling class is keen to impose restrictions on it.

Moving onto research, for me it is important to understand the past because this is a precondition for effective action in the present and in creating a future geared towards human flourishing. While we need to defend teaching and research from the tyranny of 'employability' and the demands of capital accumulation, that doesn't mean we should encourage

mere antiquarianism. Research matters. It is not a matter of freedom from relevance, but freedom to be relevant in ways not restricted to the reproduction of capital. This is a deeply political question, and so the division between activism and education is a practical question, depending on the institutions in which we operate.

Universities are part of the capitalist system, they play important roles in the reproduction of a coherent ruling class, the production of skilled labour and in furthering capital accumulation more generally. It is doubtful that a post-capitalist society would need universities as we understand them today, for knowledge would become an ‘intellectual commons’ of which all have factual possession but nobody *owns*. In present circumstances they nevertheless maintain a space that allows us to develop perspectives that go beyond the needs and indeed the interests of capital. We have a responsibility to make good use of this opportunity, for we cannot take it for granted.