

Peter Gowan Obituary

Friday 17 July 2009, by [KILMISTER Andrew](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2009).

Peter Gowan, a member of the editorial board of *Debatte* since the merger with *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* at the beginning of 2006, died on 12 June 2009 of mesothelioma. Peter was absolutely central to *Labour Focus* over three decades, as a founder member of the Editorial Collective, as managing editor for the first decade of the journal's existence, from 1977 to 1986 and as a regular contributor and Editorial Board member through the following two decades. He continued that commitment to *Debatte* after the merger; advising, encouraging and speaking at *Debatte* conferences, most recently at the April 2008 conference which we held on Russia, which was enlivened by a typically engaging and stimulating talk from Peter.

Peter attracted an enormous amount of respect and affection from a very wide variety of different quarters; from all sections of the left and from his colleagues and students at London Metropolitan University. The respect arose from his tremendous energy and the quality and scope of his writing, some of which is detailed below. More importantly however, the affection stemmed from the kind of person he was. Peter was absolutely without pretensions of any kind. From small political gatherings in the back rooms of public houses or community centres to large public lectures at high profile conferences he maintained the same qualities that we saw in Editorial Board meetings; a combination of firm statements of his own ideas with the utmost courtesy towards those disagreeing with him, a genuine commitment to open debate and a strong desire to use discussion and argument not to score points but to work in a collaborative way towards a better understanding of the world. The success of *Labour Focus* in attracting left activists from a variety of different viewpoints and traditions to work together around a common project was in large measure due to Peter's personality and approach.

The first issue of *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* appeared in March 1977 and at the same time Peter published a lengthy account of the Polish strikes of 1976 and their aftermath in *New Left Review* using the pseudonym of Peter Green [5].

Each of the first three of these strands and also the relationship between Europe and the USA, was incorporated in the most ambitious and influential work done by Peter during the 1990s; his analysis of the economic, political and military strategies of the US during the decade following the break-up of the USSR. Two events dominated here; the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98 and the war in Kosovo. Yet in neither case did Peter analyse these in isolation; rather he traced back the origins of the events of the late 1990s to the challenges to American hegemony some three decades before and the US response to this challenge.

In the case of Kosovo Peter's account filled an entire special issue of *Labour Focus* and was then carried forward in a number of successor articles [8]. In the last year of his life he produced a detailed account of the current financial and economic crisis [9].

For more than three decades Peter was a vital voice on the left both in Britain and internationally. The range of his writing was exceptional and the publications listed here are full of important insights ? insights which he also transmitted with characteristic generosity to his political comrades, academic colleagues and to his students. The work he leaves behind is a lasting legacy. Yet, sadly it is no substitute for being able once more to see that sceptical, quizzical, almost impish smile and to know that one more stimulating, provocative, maybe outrageous argument would be on the way ? and would change the way you saw things in the future.

Debate will be discussing over the next months the best way in which we can remember Peter, both at our conference this October and in the following period. In addition to this Peter's particular wish was to set up a fund to be able to award a prize to a graduate student in International Relations at London Metropolitan University where he taught. This fund is being set up through the Lipman-Miliband Trust which for the last 30 years has been dedicated to socialist education and research. If you would like to contribute to the prize fund there are several ways in which you can do this:

By Cheque

Make cheques payable to Lipman-Miliband Trust with reference on the back of the cheque to Peter Gowan Prize Fund and post to: The Lipman-Miliband Trust, PO Box 64726 London, United Kingdom, NW1 8EN

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P.S.

*By Andrew Klimister for August, 09, issue of *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*.

* Andrew Klimister teaches economics at Oxford Brooks university, is a member of the *Debatte* editorial board and a support of Socialist Resistance.

Footnotes

[1] P Green "The Third Round in Poland" (*New Left Review* no.102 February-April 1977).]] This article still stands as a remarkable analysis of competing political and economic trends both within the ruling party and state and within opposition movements. Peter's concluding sentences in many ways provide a manifesto both for *Labour Focus* and for *Debatte* as a successor journal: {"For the first time for many decades, the development of the workers' movements in the two halves of Europe can be understood today increasingly only within the framework of one single international perspective. The fate of the Polish workers' struggle during the next few years is likely to become as much a direct political factor in the class struggle in Britain as the outcome of the political crises in Spain or Portugal....It is urgently necessary for socialists in Britain to make the problems of the Polish workers their own"} [[*Ibid* p.108.]]. From 1977 to 1980 two of the main concerns of *Labour Focus* were the developing opposition currents in Poland (both the beginnings of the movement for free trade unions and the intellectuals grouped around KOR) and the growth of Charter 77 and related organisations in Czechoslovakia. Peter wrote a stream of analyses of both of these developments for the journal, both under the name of Peter Green and of Oliver MacDonald. He combined this with untiring organisation of practical solidarity for oppositionists in those countries. With the August 1980 strikes in Poland and the growth and later suppression of Solidarity, *Labour Focus* moved from mainly being concerned with reprinting documents from Central and Eastern Europe and explaining their context, towards providing more in-depth analyses of developments in the region. Peter's analyses of regional Solidarity organisations during 1981 were an important move in this direction and these accounts provided much of the basis for another substantial article in *New Left Review* dealing with this period in Poland [[O MacDonald "Building Solidarity in Szczecin" and "Building Solidarity in Walbrzych: Problems of Working Class Unity" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* Vol 4 Nos 4-6 Winter-Spring 1981). O MacDonald "The Polish Vortex: Solidarity and Socialism" (*New Left Review* no.139 May-June 1983)].

[2] O MacDonald "Normalisation-Will the Pope help?" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* Vol 6 Nos 1-2 Summer 1983), O MacDonald "The Political Struggle over Working Class Organisation" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* Vol 7 No 2 Summer 1984).

[3] O MacDonald "Petrestroika enters Critical Stage" (*Labour Focus on*

Eastern Europe Vol 9 No 2 July/August 1987) O MacDonald "Stalinism, the National Question and Separatism in the USSR" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*} No 2/1989).]]. However, with the collapse of the Eastern European regimes in 1989 and 1990 and the break-up of the USSR in the autumn of 1991 Peter's work on the region increasingly focused not just on internal questions but on the international context which in his view played a determining role in shaping the transition which followed. With great prescience he was able to grasp many of the essential characteristics of Western involvement in the area and throughout the 1990s provided an unsparing critique of the ways in which Central and East European countries had been consigned to a peripheral and insecure future within the emerging structures of international capitalism [[O MacDonald "Eastern Europe's new Self-Determination Problem?" (*Labour*

Focus on Eastern Europe No 1/1990), P Gowan "Western Economic Diplomacy and the New Eastern Europe" (*New Left Review* No.182 July-August 1990), P Gowan "The European Community and East-Central Europe?" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*} No.43 1992) P Gowan "The EC and its Eastern Neighbours" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.44 1993), P Gowan "The CIS and the World Economy" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*} No.46 1993), P Gowan "The Visegrad States and the EU?" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.50 Spring 1995), P Gowan "The Dynamics of European Enlargement?" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*} No.56 Spring 1997) [Available on ESSF: [->art14105], P Gowan "Enlargement: The Uncertainties Remain" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.59 Spring 1998), P Gowan "Peripheralisation of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s?" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*} No.65 Spring 2000).]]. Part of this critique was a detailed analysis of the role of the European Union (EU) and of the process of EU enlargement to the East. Peter brought many of the different aspects of his account of the peripheralisation of the East together in another major article for *New Left Review* in 1995 [[P Gowan "Neo-Liberal Theory and Practice for Eastern Europe" (*New Left Review* No.213 September-October 1995).

[4] P Gowan "The Gulf War, Iraq and Western Liberalism" ({*New Left Review*} No.187 May-June 1991).]]. Secondly, he undertook a critical analysis of various ideas which he saw as providing a dangerous attraction for the left, notably certain conceptions of civil society and cosmopolitanism (with the latter providing the basis for leading the left to support military intervention) [[P Gowan "In the Name of Western Values" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.47 Spring 1994), P Gowan "Germany's New Role in Europe" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*} No.48 Summer 1994).]]. Thirdly, he assessed the strategies of the EU towards Central and Eastern Europe, not just with regard to economic questions but also examining the political-military and ideological aspects of such strategies [[P Gowan "Liberals versus Neo-Liberals: A Critical Look at some recent writings on Civil Society" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.51 Summer 1995), P Gowan "The Dangers of Facade Cosmopolitanism?" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*} No.58 Autumn 1997), P Gowan "Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism" (*New Left Review* No.211 September-October 2001).

[5] P Gowan "The EU and the Unsettled Future of the East" ({*Labour Focus on*

Eastern Europe} No.67 Autumn 2000), P GowanThe EU's Human Rights Diplomacy: A Survey" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.69 Summer 2001).

[6] P Gowan "Western Europe in the Face of the Bush Campaign" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.71 Spring 2002), P GowanThe Bush Strategy and the Idea of Overstretch" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.73/74 Autumn 2002/Spring 2003), P Gowan "Europe and the New Imperialism" ({*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.75/76 Summer/Autumn 2003).]]. Later events have sharply underlined the far-sighted nature of his attempt to provide an analysis of the war which adequately encompassed both its place in American plans for a new international order and its political-economic causes while also highlighting the ideological disorientation which accompanied these events on the European left. The concept which is most prevalently associated with Peter's work, however, arises from his discussion of US economic ambitions; namely the "Dollar-Wall Street Regime" which provides the framework for his book {*The Global Gamble*}, which won the Deutscher Memorial Prize for 1999 [[P GowanThe Twisted Road to Kosovo: The Political Origins of the NATO Attack on Yugoslavia" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* No.62 Spring 1999), P Gowan *Kosovo: The War and its Aftermath*" (*Labour Focus on Eastern Europe* Autumn 1999), P GowanThe NATO Powers and the Balkan Tragedy" (*New Left Review* No.234 March-April 1999).

[7] P Gowan (1999) *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance*, Verso, London.

[8] P Gowan "A Calculus of Power" ({{*New Left Review*}} No.2:16 July-August 2002).]] and the relationship between the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and US international dominance [[P GowanUS:UN" (*New Left Review* No.2:24 November-December 2003). Available on ESSF: [US : UN - From World War Two to the Present](#)

[9] P Gowan "Twilight of the NPT?" (*New Left Review* No.2:52 July-August 2008). P Gowan `Crisis in the Heartland" (*New Left Review* No.2:55 January-February 2009). Available on ESS: [Crisis in the Heartland - Consequences of the New Wall Street System](#)