

Peter Gowan: In Memoriam

The Left has suffered a major loss with the untimely death of Peter Gowan, one of the most respected critical political economists in the world, says Leo Panitch, co-editor of "Socialist Register"

Thursday 9 July 2009, by [PANITCH Leo](#) (Date first published: 8 July 2009).

At Peter Gowan's funeral we heard a recorded interview with his fellow academic Mike Newman in which, with typical modesty and wry humour - 'don't let's get above ourselves' - he said what he was most proud of was his 'effort to perceive what's going on in the world from a non-provincial, British national or Euro-centric perspective, and to try to make sense of the world from the angle of the life of the great mass of the world's population'. Leo Panitch, co-editor of *Socialist Register*, sets out the full extent to which Gowan realised this hope and in doing laid strong foundations on which to build.

The Left has suffered a major loss with the untimely death of Peter Gowan. He was part of the generation of the 1960s who became radicalized at the height of the Vietnam War, and it was on this basis that as a 21 year old he joined the the International Marxist Group in 1967 becoming with his close comrade Tariq Ali, one its most respected members. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, he played a key role as an activist- intellectual through editing (under the pseudonym of Oliver Macdonald) *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, the best source by far for evidence of strikes and other forms of protests against the authoritarian Communist regimes. As he rose above the destructive factionalism that engulfed so much of his generation, he made a transition over the last two decades to occupy a prominent place in the Left academic world, epitomizing the best qualities of the engaged Marxist scholar. He identified the continuing class struggles in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism; he helped to foster a new understanding of the imperial nature of the American state in contemporary global capitalism, and he laid the groundwork for a historical materialist approach to the study of international relations.

Few people made the connection between Oliver Macdonald and Peter Gowan when under his own name he published a profound essay on 'The Origins of British Administrative Elite' in 1987, showing that far from establishing a meritocratic civil service in the mid-19th century, the public schools and Oxbridge were drawn on to consolidate the grip of the aristocracy and gentry on the British state. It was this civil service that the post-war Labour Governments inherited and reproduced, Gowan argued, and it was only out of the crisis of the 1970s that a current in the Tory party set out 'to destroy the inner coherence of the Whitehall elite so that its prerogatives can be used for Thatcherite purposes.'

It was by analyzing the imposition of these neoliberal purposes on Eastern Europe after 1989 through what became known as 'Shock Therapy' (as prescribed by economists like Jeffrey Sachs) that Gowan really made his mark in the 1990s, combining his first-hand knowledge of the region with a deep understanding of the active role of the states of the West in the development and spread of neoliberal globalization. He became one of the first to see clearly that globalization was not an inexorable process taking place behind the backs of states, but rather was the product of a determined state strategy. Thus, Gowan's 1995 essay on 'Neoliberal Theory and Practice in Eastern

Europe' in New Left Review concluded: '...the death of communism had led the West to try to stamp out economic nationalism in favour of its own national and collective interests in the region. But this does not so much suggest a new era on the globe as something rather old-fashioned which, in the days of communism, used to be called imperialism.'

But if the fact of Western imperialism was not new, Gowan understood that it took on a very new aspect towards the end of the 20th century. The way Gowan put this in a subsequent New Left Review essay, responding to John Lloyd and other critics of his use of the old-fashioned term imperialism, deserves to be quoted at length:

"The problem which the US faced in Eastern Europe was to implant institutional structures and rules within the states of the region that would, once in place, make the leaders of these states 'want what the US wants'. These include foreign investment regimes, trade regimes, state-market relations, appropriate freedoms for TNCs, appropriate tax regimes, minimalist welfare states, deregulated financial markets, fully convertible currencies, the absence of foreign-exchange controls, privatized utilities, appropriate regimes for mass communications, appropriately organized stock markets, the right kinds of definitions of intellectual property rights and the appropriate forms of corporate property and governance, appropriate forms of domestic ideology and politics, and so forth..."

Neo-classical imperialism promotes the juridical sovereignty of nation states to escape responsibility for the power it exercises over their political economies, and it cloaks its moves in the secrecy of decision-making within opaque, unaccountable multilateral organizations. Lastly, it promotes the myth that the world is no longer governed by the political power of imperial states but by technologically driven, modernizing forces of globalized production."

It was this understanding that informed Gowan's celebrated 1999 book, *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance*. In it, he traced the way the foundation of US imperial power, far from being weakened by the collapse of Bretton Woods in 1971, strategically shifted from political and military dominance to the financial penetration abroad of what he called the 'Dollar-Wall Street Regime'. This did not mean that military power was now unimportant. On the contrary, as Gowan meticulously demonstrated in his particularly brilliant and timely essay in the 2000 Socialist Register, 'The Real Meaning of the War over Kosovo', the war on Yugoslavia in 1999 was really all about the US demonstrating to the states of the EU that NATO, under US leadership, would remain the effective policeman of Europe in the post-Communist era.

Throughout the last decade, Gowan continued to produce a series of articles, reviews and papers that made him one of the most respected critical political economists in the world. He was much sought after for conference appearances wherever the Left gathered to take intellectual stock, and he became a mainstay at the annual Left Forums in New York each spring and at the Historical Materialism conferences in London each autumn. His analysis of the current economic crisis published in New Left Review in January of this year is a must-read, not least for those with illusions that the way forward for the Left lies in a more regulated European capitalism: 'This is not realistic. Much of the European financial system is itself in a mess, having followed the Wall Street lead towards the cliff of insolvency. The Eurozone government bond markets remain fragmented and there is no cohesive financial or political direction for the Eurozone, leave alone a consensus for rebuilding the Eurozone as a challenger to the dollar through a political confrontation with the United States.'

On March 4th this year, Colin Leys, my co-editor of the *Socialist Register*, sent me his notes from a seminar Gowan gave at SOAS that evening, and added: 'Of course I haven't caught his engagingly provocative style, or the sense he conveys of being really on top of it all, having read all the books and especially histories and biographies, and synthesizing so much all the time. I found it totally

absorbing, as usual.' What Colin then went on to write really captures what a truly remarkable person Peter Gowan was:

"I was there early and so was he so we could chat. He immediately said he had come straight from spending half the day getting his fifth and penultimate dose of chemo. Amazing. He said he was doing well. If the cancer doesn't come back in the six months after his final dose or 'cycle' in April, he said, he would be laughing. If it does, it was 'turn left for the hospice'. I am amazed not just at his openness, and his carrying on with work like that, but at the way he positively insists on putting his illness on the table. He said there is a generational difference: young people think of cancer as something curable, whereas ours grew up thinking of it as a death sentence, and so taboo. But his attitude seems an extreme response - incredibly brave, and healthy."

P.S.

* The original article will appear in August/September issue of Red Pepper. Posted online by the Transnational Institute:

http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml...

* Leo Panitch is editor of the Socialist Register.