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Cliff Slaughter, 1928-2021: a life for revolution and its challenging legacy

Terry Brotherstone

*Cliff Slaughter's life (1928-2021) was dedicated to working-class internationalism and socialist revolution. A scholarship boy in post-World-War-II Cambridge he became a university lecturer in his native Yorkshire doing important work in social anthropology. But it was the theory and practice of Marxism that guided him. After leaving the Communist Party at the time of the 1956 Stalinist crisis, he joined the Trotskyist group led by Gerry Healy and worked tirelessly for the Socialist Labour League, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) and the International Committee of the Fourth International. Increasingly at odds with Healy's political prognoses, pragmatic practice and subjective philosophising, Slaughter finally broke with him in 1985, when his morally corrupt, abusive exploitation of idealistic young comrades was exposed. Slaughter played a key role in calling time on the by-then politically bankrupt WRP, but remained actively committed to international working-class struggle and socialist revolution. The last period of his life was devoted to confronting the 'brutal reality' that, despite the work of all who, for much of the twentieth century, had worked as Marxists in the working-class movement, the working people of the world remain subject to a capital system that poses greater threats to humanity than ever. Concluding that what was needed was the 'refoundation' of the working-class movement and internationalism, and therefore also of Marxism, he produced several books increasingly radical in their critique. Theoretically re-energised by the collapse of the Stalinist system in 1989-91, he drew on discussions with István Mészáros, whose *Beyond Capital* appeared in 1995; and on Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, which he came to embrace as the best twentieth-century exposition of Marx's materialism. The starting-point for reflection on Slaughter's challenging legacy is his last published article, which appeared in *Critique* in 2020.*

Cliff Slaughter, whose life was dedicated to revolutionary, working-class internationalism and Marxist critique, died at the home in Leeds where he lived with Vivien

Mitchell, his comrade and wife of 55 years, on 3 May 2021, aged 92. His last published article – an appeal for the radical rethinking of how Marx’s materialism should be practised today – appeared in *Critique* at the end of 2020. That essay now looks like a Parthian shot, a posthumous challenge to serious socialists to shed shibboleths and engage without prejudice in theoretical work as an indispensable part of revolutionary practice. It deserves to be revisited in the light of the two corrections in the footnote below.¹

I

Clifford Slaughter, a working-class Yorkshire boy, was born in the industrial city of Doncaster on 18 September 1928 and brought up – at times during the 1930s Depression in very deprived circumstances – there, and in Leeds, fifty miles to the north-west, where he was to live most of his life. Joining the Young Communist League (YCL) in 1947, and later the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), he chose to work as a coalminer rather than do national service in the military, before, in 1949, taking up a scholarship at Downing College, Cambridge. There he was one of a handful of working-class students who at that time won places at England’s elite universities, where they frequently suffered from upper-class ridicule and bullying. On one occasion, Slaughter had to endure having his books removed from his room and burned in the quad, a crime he was invited by the senior member of College to whom he complained to regard as an understandable aspect of English ‘public school’ culture.

Unimpressed by the conservative History curriculum, Slaughter decided to study social anthropology, a subject that allowed greater scope for the imagination of someone who, tutored by his much-revered father (a sometime Durham miner and Methodist lay preacher, and a wartime recruit to the CPGB in 1943),² was already well-versed in the available works of Marxism, as well as in creative literature – notably the novels of Stendhal, quotations from which continued to enrich some of his latter-day political writing. Graduating with a first-class degree, Slaughter returned to Yorkshire and a lectureship at the University of Leeds. (He later moved to Bradford, where he taught until retirement.)³

¹ Cliff Slaughter, ‘More than a theory, “a guide to action!” Theses on Marx (on reading Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*)’, *Critique* 90, 48:4 (December 2020), pp. 549–562. That, rather than as published, is how the title should appear (p. 549) – making it clear that the reference is to Bloch’s 3-volume book, first published in the 1950s. The more important correction is that the article’s last six paragraphs (on pp. 561–562), which appear indented as if a quotation, are actually Slaughter’s conclusion and should be in plain text.

² If readers found his style repetitive, Slaughter wrote in the preface to his 2006 book, *Not Without a Storm* (reference below), he offered no apology. His father Fred, a ‘celebrated ... Methodist preacher in the mining villages of County Durham’ who ‘became a militant atheist and communist soapbox agitator and propagandist’ had passed on ‘his secret: First tell “em what you’re going to tell ‘em. Then tell ‘em. Then tell ‘em what you’ve told em”.’ I am grateful to Bridget Fowler for reminding me of this quotation.

³ Between his Leeds and Bradford appointments he had a period as a full-time worker for the Trotskyist movement.

The 1956 crisis in the international Communist movement changed the direction of Slaughter's life. He was the last prominent survivor of a small group of English communists who – on breaking with, or being expelled from, the CPGB in the aftermath of the Khrushchev revelations about Stalin at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1956 and the Red Army's brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution that autumn – joined the pugnaciously energetic T. G. ('Gerry') Healy in his Trotskyist 'Club', which, at that time of bitter disillusionment, offered a new perspective to principled revolutionary socialists.⁴ Amongst them – and amongst those closest to Slaughter, despite decades in which Healy's sectarian politics made ongoing relationships with non-party comrades difficult – were Brian Pearce (1915-2008) and Peter Fryer (1927-2006). Pearce, a history graduate and a linguist, insisted, against the indifference of the CPGB's better-known professional historians, on the political importance of rigorous examination of the history of Stalinism: he went on to become a prolific, and prize-winning, scholarly translator from both Russian and French. He was also a great letter writer, and Slaughter often consulted him over the years until his death, particularly on historical questions. Fryer was the *Daily Worker* journalist who, after his truthful reporting from Budapest was suppressed by the CPGB leaders, published his impassioned critique of Stalinism, *Hungarian Tragedy* (1956) and was hounded out of the Party: he was later to write the seminal *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain* (1984), for which he is still celebrated as a pioneer of Black British history.⁵ Fryer's and Pearce's involvement in what, in 1959, was to become the Socialist Labour League (SLL), and – long after they had been alienated by Healy's bouts of thuggish authoritarianism and left the organisation – the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), was relatively short-lived. But the participation of comrades of such calibre in the late 1950s helped make possible two significant socialist publications in which Slaughter came to play a major role: the expanded and transformed (from its first volume in the early 1950s) *Labour Review* (vols. 2-7, 1957-1963), initially edited by John Daniels and Bob Shaw; and a weekly paper established by Fryer, *The Newsletter* (1957-1969 – latterly twice-weekly).⁶ Both deserve renewed attention from historically-conscious socialists today.

⁴ Of other important recruits from the CPGB to Healy's group, only the economic historian, Tom Kemp (1921-93), along with Slaughter, had not left it within a few years. See Terry Brotherstone, '1956: Tom Kemp and others', in Brotherstone and Geoff Pilling (eds) *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: Essays in Memory of Tom Kemp (1921-1993)* (London: Porcupine Press, 1996), pp. 293-349.

⁵ Peter Fryer, *Hungarian Tragedy*, first ed., (London: Denis Dobson, 1956); *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain*, 1st ed. (London: Pluto Press, 1984). The most recent edition of the latter, with a preface by Gary Younge and an introduction by Paul Gilroy was published in 2018. For a discussion in which Pearce and Fryer recalled these years, see Terry Brotherstone, 'The 1956-57 Crisis in the Communist Party of Great Britain: Four Witnesses', *Critique* 42, 35:2 (August 2007), pp. 189-210. An obituary of Fryer, quoting Slaughter, is in the same issue at pp. 297-302.

⁶ *Labour Review* is available at <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/lr/index.html>>; *The Newsletter* at <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/newsletter/index.htm>>, both accessed, 12 January 2022.

The unrealised political potential of that period was, I am sure, to play a significant part in Slaughter's thinking as he reflected on it after the collapse of the Healy WRP in 1985. It was a time when it had been possible to develop real political conversations with militant workers in several industries – coal-miners, with whom Slaughter had particularly close relationships, dockworkers and others. But Healy's prioritisation of top-down 'party-building', based on ideas drawn mechanically and unhistorically from the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* and Lenin's 1902 pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* – that socialist consciousness has to be delivered to the workers 'from without' by theoretically-well-versed intellectuals and party professionals – vitiated, and was often to abort, such organic developments. From an account Slaughter wrote of the funeral in 2000 of an old comrade, Jim Allen (the former seaman and miner, turned scriptwriter and collaborator with the radical film director, Ken Loach), however, we can get a sense of the sort of political force Slaughter hoped the SLL might become, and why he remained, for so long, committed to fighting within an organisation despite being increasingly at odds with its leadership.

In the late 1950s, as an SLL member, but independently of any 'party decision', Slaughter wrote, Allen:

was the moving force behind a new newspaper, *The Miner* ... [which] rapidly gained a readership throughout the Lancashire and Yorkshire coalfields ... [and appealed because] it told the plain truth about the life and work of coalminers, about their employer (the National Coal Board) and about their union leadership. Thousands of miners recognised it as their own, and ... organised around it.

And in a 'Personal Note', Slaughter added:

I can honestly say that the years ... in the Yorkshire coalfield with this paper were some of the most rewarding and enjoyable of my life ... [H]ere was a paper which workers accepted as their own. It had not a trace of sectarianism ... written by miners for miners ... with fire and with humour. Sales ... were not a chore but a pleasure ... The paper really was 'an organiser'. It was workers won by *The Miner* who formed and led the branches of the SLL in the Yorkshire coalfield ... The group of miners around Jim ... was a team able to establish immediate relations with miners everywhere, and ... the union leadership and the NCB could do nothing about it.

'One of the few compliments' he recalled ever receiving 'in a long political life', he went on, was from one of Allen's miner-comrades, who, when chairing a meeting introduced him (a non-miner) as 'an egghead', but one 'with his feet on the ground.'⁷

Relationships made at this time were surely in Slaughter's mind when, ill-health having prevented him from attending, he sent a heartfelt message to a memorial meeting for Peter Fryer in London in 2019 in which he wrote of how, after the crisis of 1956, 'Peter never once wavered in [his] communist conviction, fighting

⁷ Cliff Slaughter, 'Jim Allen: an Appreciation', *Work in Progress: a Bulletin to Promote Discussion about the Future of Socialism*, no.1, 2001, copy available in the British Library or from t.brotherstone@abdn.ac.uk, pp. 56, 57.

and writing to his dying day for the oppressed and exploited [with] works like *Staying Power ...*. Forced out of the SLL, Fryer had found other ways of playing a role in the development of socialist consciousness and Slaughter recognised that his break with Healy over his manipulatively inhuman political regime was of a piece with his communist convictions. His 'experience had taught him,' Slaughter wrote, 'how to be a good communist, following in the footsteps of the young Marx [who wrote of the] impassioned man [who] feels that he is himself a human being, and that others are human beings yet are for the most part treated like dogs ...' Fryer, after being, as he once put it, 'twice bitten' (by Stalin and then by Healy), had decided he needed time to reflect. And this, acknowledged Slaughter, who remained in Healy's organisation over the next three decades, strenuously fighting him over many issues but always feeling constrained by loyalty to party discipline, had allowed him to see – 'much earlier than I did' – that Healy's idea of 'building the revolutionary leadership at the expense of all personal needs and talents,' and his effective downgrading 'of independent working-class action as mere 'spontaneity'', was fundamentally wrong.⁸

In the aftermath of the defeat of Britain's miners in the great strike of 1984-5, which exposed the vacuity of the WRP's predictions of incipient revolution and claims to revolutionary leadership, and drove Healy to hysterical predictions that fascism was around the corner, a key group of WRP members finally rebelled and exposed their leader as a sexual predator. Slaughter immediately aligned himself with the rebels and, having played a key role in calling time on Healy's organisation, worked to repair, wherever possible, the damage its sectarianism had done to valuable political relationships. In his message to the Fryer memorial meeting, he noted with retrospective delight, that 'Peter was overjoyed [at Healy's expulsion] and ... embraced with enthusiasm our invitation to join us and write in [the paper we then published] *Workers Press*.'⁹ Pearce also became a regular contributor.

Although well-respected in the university as scholar and teacher – one with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Marx's writings – Slaughter always eschewed the potential relative comfort of a socially detached academic life. Despite his growing distance from Healy's authoritarian methods and subjective political predictions, he was indefatigable in carrying out serious political and educational work, not only amongst

⁸ Slaughter had known Fryer in Yorkshire when he was in the YCL in the late 1940s. His tribute was read to the packed memorial meeting, which was prompted by the publication of a new edition of *Staying Power*. Platform speakers at the meeting, held at University College, London, on Thursday 3 October, 2019, were historian and broadcaster David Olusoga, journalist and scholar Gary Younge, and, in the absence of Slaughter, myself. An appreciation stressing the interconnectedness of Fryer's communist support for the Hungarian Revolution and his work on Black history is Peter Fraser, 'Peter Fryer (1927–2006): An Appreciation', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 27:1 (2009), pp. 123–128: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619280902896304>, accessed 19 December 2021.

⁹ *Workers Press* had been launched as the daily paper of the SLL in 1969, and much of its run is available online at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workers-press-uk/index.htm> (accessed 11 January 2022). It ran until 1976 when it was superseded, after a hiatus, by *The NewsLine*. The group that, after the expulsion of Healy, took its theoretical lead from Slaughter re-appropriated the original name for its (whenever possible) weekly publication. That *Workers Press* – accessed 10 January 2022 – is archived at <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workers-press-last-uk/index.htm>>.

British workers but also internationally. As secretary of the Healy-led version of the Fourth International – the International Committee (ICFI) – he made many valued relationships, notably amongst comrades in the French *Organisation Communiste Internationaliste* (OCI), such as the much-respected, independently-minded militant, ‘Raoul’, remembered by his comrade, the historian and Trotsky biographer, Pierre Broué, in a lengthy and insightful tribute in the journal *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*.¹⁰

The fissiparous sectarianism of the Trotskyist ‘parties’ of this period as they struggled to connect with the real movement of the working class, however, meant such comradely friendships were often broken off, and a focus of Slaughter’s work in the difficult and still conflict-prone years that followed the end of the Healy WRP was on restoring them where he could. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and then, in 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union, it at last became possible to clarify many underlying political differences on the basis of the understanding that Stalinism no longer had the material base that had made it the ideological – and sometimes the very real and violent – enemy of revolutionary Marxism and its adherents. The bitter disputes about which group or sect was the true bearer of Trotsky’s legacy, to which Slaughter had had to devote so much energy, had lost their political, if not entirely their historical, rationale. It was a time for new thinking, which for Slaughter included recognising the reality that, as a practical expression of working-class internationalism, the ICFI had been – as he put it years later to an interviewer – ‘virtually a fiction’, consisting of small groups, only a few of them having had any real influence within the organisation.¹¹

II

In his scholarly work, Slaughter never felt constrained to hide his class commitment under an academic bushel. He researched and published, jointly with Norman Denis and Fernando Henriques, the seminal study of a Yorkshire mining community, *Coal Is Our Life* (1956), which has been much reprinted.¹² An associated article on gender relations appeared in the leading professional journal, *The Sociological Review*, in which Slaughter continued to publish a number of specialist reviews, always from an explicitly Marxist standpoint.¹³ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he participated

¹⁰ Raoul was the party name of Claude Bernard (21 December, 1921–7 May, 1994), a well-respected, independently-minded, Trotskyist militant: see Pierre Broué, ‘Raoul, militant trotskyste’, *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*, Numero special, no. 56, Juillet 1995, pp. 3–133.

¹¹ ‘Cliff Slaughter: a Life for Socialism,’ *The Red Flag* (Australia), 29 August 2020: accessed 19 December 2021 at <<https://splitsandfusions.wordpress.com/2020/08/29/cliff-slaughter-a-life-for-socialism/iInterview>>. This was a perhaps slightly impatient response in an interview that is a less than satisfactory source with Slaughter giving terse and sometimes not fully considered answers.

¹² Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal Is Our Life: an Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community*, 1st ed., (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956).

¹³ Cliff Slaughter, ‘Modern Marriage and the Role of the Sexes’, *The Sociological Review*, 4:2 (1956), pp. 213–221. Books reviewed by Slaughter in subsequent years included: George Friedmann, *The Anatomy of Work*, 1960; Clark Kerr et al., *Industrialism and Industrial Man*, 1964; A. Sturmhals, *A Study of Workplace Organisation*

in a major project designed to address the crisis in Greek archaeology, the Cambridge/Bradford Boeotian Expedition.¹⁴ This interest led to an important review article on Geoffrey de Ste Croix's highly original Marxist study of class struggle in ancient Greece.¹⁵ But for Slaughter there was also a political motive: this was a period of great volatility when the 1981 Greek elections brought to office a majority reforming administration of the left social-democrat Panhellenic Socialist Movement, PASOK, led by Andreas Papandreou. Relationships Slaughter made with left-wing activists and intellectuals endured and were to be valuable three decades later in informing his response to the Syriza government and the defiant 'OXI' (or 'No!') referendum vote in 2015 against European Unity-imposed austerity. This was a moment Slaughter greeted for its potential – real though alas unrealised – to act as 'a signal to the masses of people throughout Europe that it is both necessary and possible to reject and oppose the demands of big capital.'¹⁶

In 1980 came his book of critical essays, *Marxism, Ideology and Literature*, presented by Slaughter as a much-needed 'confrontation between Marxism and the sociology of literature', and recognised in Marxist circles as a significant anti-Althusserian study.¹⁷ (Slaughter's views on Louis Althusser were elaborated in the WRP journal *Labour Review*).¹⁸ An introductory book on *Marx and Marxism*

on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain, 1964; Włodzimierz Brus, *Socialist Ownership and Political Systems*, 1975; Colin Renfrew and Michael Wagstaff, eds., *An Island Policy: the archaeology of exploitation in Melos*, 1982; and Gabriel Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City*, 1987. I am grateful to Anna Girling for facilitating my access to this body of work.

¹⁴ See Cliff Slaughter and Charalambos Kasimis, 'Some Socio-Anthropological Aspects of Boeotian Rural Society: a Field Report', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 10 (1986), pp. 103–160; and J. L. Bintliff and A. M. Snodgrass, 'The Cambridge/Bradford Boeotian Expedition: the First Four Years,' *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 12:2 (Summer 1985), pp. 123–161. Slaughter once told me that one thing he had taken from this work was increased admiration for the work on ancient society done in the 19th century by Friedrich Engels and Lewis H. Morgan.

¹⁵ C. Slaughter, 'Extended Review' of G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: from the Arabic Age to the Arab Conquests* (London: Duckworth, 1981) in *The Sociological Review*, 30:4 (1982), pp. 719–727

¹⁶ Cliff Slaughter, 'First ... a Last Word', in his *Against Capital ...*, citation below.

¹⁷ Cliff Slaughter, *Marxism, Ideology and Literature*, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), p. 1; on the anti-humanist influence of Althusser's work on contemporary Marxist literary criticism, see esp. pp. 200 ff.

¹⁸ Cliff Slaughter, 'The Poverty of Althusser's "Theory"', *Labour Review* (new series), III:1 (June 1979), pp. 5–13. Slaughter endorsed the historian E. P. Thompson's attack on Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978); but went on to argue that merely to counterpoise 'experience' to 'Stalinist dogmatism, including the Althusserian rationalist variety', was to perpetuate 'a source of confusion, because it ... relegate[s] to the background the great question of what is essential about the thing experienced.' This series of *Labour Review*, running monthly from June 1977 to March 1982, with Slaughter on the editorial board, attempted to recover some of the theoretical engagement that had characterised its eponymous predecessor in the late 1950s, and to reinvigorate the wider intellectual interest in his group that Healy had created, amongst creative media radicals in particular, in the 1960s and during the acute class struggles of early 1970s Britain. Stuart Hood, the former BBC director of television, noted for his memoir about his wartime participation in the anti-fascist struggles of the Italian *partigiani*, *Pebbles From My Skull* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1960), was persuaded to contribute, but the success was limited and short-lived: on Hood, see David Hutchison and David Johnston, eds., *Stuart Hood, Twentieth-Century Partisan*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2020), esp. chapters I (pp. 10–34 by Terry Brotherstone) and V (pp. 88–100 by Tony Garnett). *Labour*

appeared in 1985; a critique of the at-the-time fashionable work of Jon Elster, who argued that Marx could be read as in some way a functionalist, contributed to an *Inquiry* symposium the following year; and an essay on ‘Engels and Class Consciousness’, written for the 150th anniversary of Engels’ *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) was published, a little belatedly, in 1996.¹⁹

During the 1960s and seventies and into the eighties, however, much of Slaughter’s time was spent on making voluminous contributions to ‘party’ literature, in Britain and for the International. He found himself more and more at odds with Healy’s increasingly opportunist politics and eccentric philosophising, but he came to recognise that his work (and that of other party ‘intellectuals’) had served, in the eyes of loyal, and politically-exploited, activists at least, to give Healy, by association, an undeserved cachet of theoretical respectability. He made a self-assessment of his role in those years when he spoke to a meeting of international supporters in 2012:

Recently I read Jean-Paul Sartre’s book about his childhood. His upbringing in a house of professors, filled with books, led him to put words and phrases ahead of the reality. He spent his life trying to get rid of this nonsense. It made me rethink all our talk of theoretical work, the role of intellectuals, and so on. Speaking for myself, I wasn’t really doing any real theoretical work or analysis. Most of it – if you look through internal bulletins and papers – consisted essentially of finding the right quotations for every occasion: something in Lenin or Trotsky or Marx that would explain what was going on. That’s not real research or real theory.²⁰

In the 1970s, Slaughter had opposed Healy on the ‘pre-revolutionary’ nature of the period and on other questions.²¹ But he failed to overcome the leadership’s manoeuvring that ensured his disagreements were always sidelined, and kept from the active membership. Acquiring the resources for creating the party apparatus – printing facilities for a daily paper, party offices, bookshops, training centres to attract a hoped-for mass youth movement and so on – that Healy thought his perspective demanded,

Review was replaced in the early 1980s by the more pragmatic, magazine-style, *Fourth International*, aimed at political activists rather than Marxist intellectuals.

¹⁹ Cliff Slaughter, *Marx and Marxism: an Introduction*, (Harlow: Longman, 1985); ‘Making Sense of Elster’, in ‘Symposium: Jon Elster’s *Making Sense of Marx*’, *Inquiry*, 29: 1-4 (1986), pp. 45–56; and ‘Engels and Class Consciousness’ in John Lea and Geoff Pilling, eds., *The Condition of Britain; Essays on Frederick Engels*, (London: Pluto Press, 1996), pp. 110-127.

²⁰ The October 2012 Agency Group, ‘Seminar on Agency’: transcript of a meeting to discuss Slaughter’s book *Bonfire of the Certainties*, October 27, 2012, pp. 39-40, copies available from t.brotherstone@abdn.ac.uk.

²¹ I am grateful to Vivien Slaughter for the information that correspondence providing details about these matters survives, and will in time, it is to be hoped, find its way into an archive. My own friendship with the Slaughters postdates 1985. During the WRP years, although for a period on the Central Committee, I was essentially a Healyite trooper with little insight into policy formation, and certainly not a Slaughter confidant. For Slaughter’s brief assessment of Healy’s history and political degeneration, see Cliff Slaughter, Vivien Slaughter and Yasmine Mather, *Women and the Social Revolution*, (Peterborough: Spiderwize, 2018), pp. 69-70. For more on Healy, see John McIlroy, ‘Thomas Gerard (Gerry) Healy (1913-1989): Trotskyist Leader’ in Keith Gildart and David Howell (eds) *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. 12 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), accessed on 31/01/2022 at <<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/mcilroy/gerry-healy.htm>>.

went along with the degeneration of a politics in which, *inter alia*, principled internationalism and conditional support for national-liberation movements were increasingly superseded by opportunist relations with often corrupt nationalist regimes open to the exchange of material resources for supportive propaganda. This left the group that sought, after the termination of the Healy party and led by Slaughter, to recover a critical Marxist orientation with much to reassess. Slaughter's focus was on serving the future rather than bemoaning the past, but he recognised the need to correct mistakes, amongst the most damaging of which had been the essentially uncritical support the WRP had given to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Yassamine Mather, the Iranian socialist activist and scholar, now based in Oxford and chair of Hands Off the People of Iran, remembers meeting Slaughter in the mid-1980s:

He was the first British left-wing activist I met who apologised for his former organisation's support for Khomeini. He was adamant that the British working class should show solidarity with Iranian workers, and [that] slogans of an anti-Western (as opposed to an anti-imperialist) government should not confuse the left. He remained a solid ally of the Iranian working class to the last days of his life.²²

III

In the excitement of the post-soviet years, though still – working with some highly committed comrades who were fighting to rescue a positive legacy from the WRP experience – grappling with the idea of party-building as a key element in contemporary revolutionary practice, Slaughter increasingly extended his rejection of 'Healyism' to a more complete critique of the foundations of the 'Trotskyism' that based itself on the 1938 'Transitional Programme', the document that launched the Fourth International. The vital significance of Trotsky's courageous fight against Stalinism stood undiminished. But the proposition that 'the world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat' because the 'economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism' had quite simply been proved wrong.²³ Lenin's definition of imperialism as 'the highest [or final] stage of capitalism', whatever else the organisational genius of the October Revolution had been right about, had been misleading in promoting the idea that capital now lacked inherent resilience and the ability to overcome cyclical crises, even extreme ones. Each recovery – including the long post-war 'boom' in the West – however real its technological advances, has carried within it the seeds of even greater destructiveness. But the implication that the coming of socialism ('truly human society') has been thwarted simply by the failure – primarily

²² Yassamine Mather, email copied to the author, 28 December 2021.

²³ 'The Objective Prerequisites for a Socialist Revolution', in part one of *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International. The Transitional Program* (1938); many editions: accessed 6 January 2022 at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text.htm#>.

through the (albeit very real) ‘betrayals’ of social democracy and Stalinism – to create revolutionary leadership in the working class had become a major obstacle in the way of the creative development of Marxism as practical revolutionary theory. The truth had to be embraced, concluded Slaughter, who had often been a cuttingly effective scourge of ‘revisionism’, that certain tenets of established theory *do*, in the face of empirical reality, have to be revised.

A dialogue with the Marxist political philosopher, István Mészáros, then on the cusp of publishing his masterwork, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition*, fed productively into Slaughter’s new thinking. It began when, in the early 1990s, they found themselves amongst a minority on the revolutionary left that wholeheartedly welcomed the so-called ‘collapse of Communism’.²⁴ Where many others mourned the death of ‘really existing socialism’, they recognised that the end of Stalinism as a material force had removed a decades-long obstacle to socialist revolution and severely weakened a major source of ideological confusion. The time was ripe for Mészáros’s book, which was the product of his experience in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and subsequent exile, and of over two decades of rethinking three key questions: how had capitalism survived so long from the first recognition of its historical transience in the 1840s?; what had gone wrong with the soviet experiment?; and how could Marx’s theory be recovered as the practical guide to the revolutionary transformation required and its realisation in a way that will avoid the mistakes and disappointments of the twentieth century?²⁵

All this was grist to Slaughter’s mill. In his *Not Without a Storm*, published in 2006, he addressed the need to be ‘brutal’ about the reality that, despite all the efforts of those ‘of us who for a good part of the twentieth century tried to work as Marxists in the working-class movement’, the ‘world’s working people remain, in the new millennium, at the mercy of a capital system that has survived all their struggles and confronts them with greater threats than ever before.’ Vital to his attempt to address that ‘one big sobering fact,’ he acknowledged, ‘was the work of István Mészáros’; and most importantly his demonstration that it was with what was being called ‘globalisation’ that ‘the capital system [had] encountered its historical limit, its structural crisis.’²⁶

Mészáros’s comprehensive rethinking of Marxism – prefigured as early as 1970 in his *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* and his Isaac Deutscher Memorial lecture on ‘The Necessity of Social Control’ the following year, continuing with, amongst other

²⁴ Istvan Meszaros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition*, (London: Merlin Press, 1995). On Mészáros, see Terry Brotherstone, ‘A Tribute to István Mészáros (1930-2017)’, *Critique* 81, 46:2 (May 2018), pp. 327–337; *Monthly Review*, which published many of Mészáros’s articles also carried an obituary appreciation: see *Monthly Review*, 69:7 (December 2017): https://monthlyreview.org/2017/12/01/mr-069-07-2017-11_0/, accessed 17 December 2021.

²⁵ Brotherstone, ‘A Tribute ...’, pp. 332–333.

²⁶ Cliff Slaughter, *Not Without a Storm: Towards a Communist Manifesto for the Age of Globalisation*, (London: Index Books, 2006), p.3. The radical development of Slaughter’s thinking at this time can be seen by comparing *Not Without a Storm* with his previous booklet, *A New Party for Socialism – Why? How? When? By Whom? On What Programme? Answers to some burning questions and some new questions* (London: Workers Revolutionary Party (Workers Press), 1996).

work, *The Power of Ideology* (1989), and reaching fruition with *Beyond Capital* – developed into a multi-volume project still incomplete when he died in 2017.²⁷ The ‘Himalayan’ task before humanity in its twenty-first-century confrontation with Rosa Luxemburg’s century-old choice of ‘socialism or barbarism’, he argued, had to be understood as involving much more than the political victory of the working-class over capitalism. What is needed is rather the social-metabolic transition – in what Slaughter articulated in 2013 in the subtitle of his *Bonfire of the Certainties*, as ‘the second human revolution’ – beyond capital itself, the power that has dominated different forms of society over many centuries. Slaughter’s own work, building on the foundations of new thinking Mészáros had laid, increasingly focused on going further – particularly in rethinking the problem of transitional agency. His next book *Against Capital*, in 2016, accordingly, was a collective study of contemporary, practical ‘experiences of class struggle’ and of ‘rethinking revolutionary agency’.²⁸ In a richly engaged *Critique* review, Bridget Fowler recommended it for its penetrating global, socio-political analysis; for its ‘timely’ rejection of the ‘bankers’ fatalism of the ‘end of history’ ideologists’; and, particularly, for its ‘scrupulously honest’ confrontation with acknowledged error, ‘not about Marxism as such – which rightly remains a treasured resource – but rather about the imposition of doctrinaire ‘democratic centralism’.’²⁹

Slaughter’s theoretical work continued until shortly before his death; and his final *Critique* article was designed to signal a yet more radical new beginning. As Mészáros said, in paying tribute to him at a launch meeting for *Bonfire of the Certainties* in 2012:

... my friend Cliff Slaughter ... always remained firmly in a revolutionary orientation even if the organisation he was attached to [the WRP] was ... extremely problematical. He [always] maintained this determined position of thinking in terms of a revolutionary perspective.³⁰

And it was commitment to that perspective that had led Slaughter to play an indispensable role in the break-up of the WRP in 1985, when Healy was finally denounced from within the ranks of his own organisation as a political opportunist with a cowardly predilection for discipline enforced by intimidation rather than argument and persuasion; and incontrovertibly – the decisive charge leading to his expulsion – a

²⁷ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, (London, Merlin Press, 1970); *The Power of Ideology*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); *Beyond Capital*, op. cit. For other volumes in Mészáros’s project, see Brotherstone, ‘A Tribute ...’, p. 333. The first of what was designed as three volumes of *Beyond Leviathan: Critique of the State* was published posthumously by Monthly Review Press in early 2022.

²⁸ Slaughter’s principal recent works are: *Not Without a Storm*, op. cit.; *Bonfire of the Certainties: the Second Human Revolution*, (Morrisville, NC.: Lulu, 2013); the edited volume, *Against Capital: Experiences of Class Struggle and Rethinking Revolutionary Agency*, (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2016); and, with Vivien Slaughter and Yasmine Mather, *Women and the Social Revolution*, op. cit.

²⁹ Bridget Fowler, review article, *Against Capital: Experiences of Class Struggle and Rethinking Revolutionary Agency*, in *Critique* 77, 45:1-2 (February 2017), pp. 205–215.

³⁰ Mészáros was speaking at the 2012 meeting on *Bonfire of the Certainties*: see footnote 20 above.

sexual predator, exploiting the idealism of young women comrades for personal gratification.

Andrew Burgin, now the International Officer of Ken Loach's Left Unity, who was a WRP member at the time of the 1985 crisis, spoke for many when, on hearing of Slaughter's death, he posted on social media his account of the 'important part' he had played in his own political education; and of how, when Healy's corruption was revealed and WRP national organiser, Sheila Torrance, defended him with the argument 'that [his] role as a revolutionary socialist was a more important consideration than the allegations of sexual abuse' (an argument repeated by Healy's 'celebrity' allies, Corin and Vanessa Redgrave), Slaughter led, and gave direction to, the opposition.³¹ He:

dissect[ed] her argument and, in a hugely powerful speech, made the case for a revolutionary morality and linked the abuse directly to Healy's politics. He concluded that the abuse itself expressed the degeneration of Healy's politics and of those who now sought to defend him ... [Slaughter] was one of the central figures ... who sought to repair the damage and set the organisation on its feet politically speaking ... At every point [he] ... attempted to raise the level of discussion and to overcome the abuses of the past ... He deeply regretted the part he had played in sustaining Healy's regime but tried to overcome that through the building of a healthy political tendency in the post-split period ...³²

Slaughter's internationalist commitment was undiminished by his recognition that the corruption of the WRP had permeated the politics of what, as far as he was concerned, was now, for practical purposes, the defunct ICFI. In addition to his determination to correct the opportunist errors of the WRP's past – and the Iranian revolution referred to above was only one question amongst many – it was manifested particularly in his enthusiastic support for Workers Aid for Bosnia (and later for Kosova), which in the 1990s organised working-class aid convoys to miners and other trade unionists fighting for national liberation from the Milosevic dictatorship in the former Yugoslavia; and also in his solidarity work in southern Africa, where he went with the Marxist social anthropologist Frank Girling (1917-2004) – another former CPGB member who had briefly joined with Healy after 1956 – in support of anti-Stalinist fighters in the liberation movements there.³³ He was

³¹ Left Unity was founded in the United Kingdom in 2013 when more than 10,000 people responded to an appeal from the radical film director, Ken Loach, for a new party to oppose the UK Establishment consensus supporting the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government's 'austerity' programme. It is affiliated to the European Left Party.

³² Burgin's Facebook post made clear that only a minority of WRP members supported Healy at the London 'aggregate' meeting at which Slaughter spoke – and it was an even smaller minority in the organisation at large. The post concluded with Burgin's 'salute' to Slaughter, 'a comrade who devoted his long life to the struggle ...' I am grateful to Andrew Burgin for his permission to quote his comments. There are eyewitness accounts of Slaughter's speech in Clare Cowen, *My Search for Revolution & How we brought down an abusive leader*, (Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2019), pp. 308–13 (informed by contemporary notes); and in Norman Harding, *Staying Red: Why I Remain a Socialist*, (London: Index Books, 2005), pp. 250ff.

³³ For Girling, see my (co-contributed) obituary in *The Scotsman*, 4 April 2004: accessed 19 December 2021 at <https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/frank-girling-246919> and Tim Allen, 'Introduction: Colonial

particularly inspired by the courageous Namibian twin sisters, Panduleni and Ndamona Kali, who had fought – at the cost of great personal suffering – against both apartheid *and* the brutal and dehumanising internal regime of the military wing of SWAPO, the South West Africa People’s Organisation, which replicated that of its close ally, the African National Congress. Appropriately an image of these two women graced the cover of Slaughter’s last published book, *Women and the Social Revolution*, co-authored with Vivien Slaughter and Yassamine Mather: it was dedicated (no doubt with the reactionary, bourgeois gender relations that had prevailed in the WRP partly in mind) to the memory of the American liberationist Maria Turner and her appeal – at the time of the Southampton slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831 – on behalf of ‘the fair daughters of Africa’, that they should no longer ‘be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles’ or have to tolerate the fruits of their labours being enjoyed by exploitative men.³⁴

In Africa too Slaughter met with militant students, one of whom, Jade McClune – now a committed fighter for social justice, campaigner for land rights in Namibia, and eloquent polemicist against neoliberalism – has written that he remembers Slaughter as ‘perhaps the most civilized man I ever met’, a judgement based ‘not so much [on] Cliff’s theoretical insight as his demeanour and non-bourgeois character.’ McClune recalls:

Attending a lecture in Windhoek where he came dressed in denims and delivered a myth-shattering analysis – that had such a profound impact on me as a student, and on my view of the world and of my place in it that it somehow altered the course and trajectory of my life.

Though he clearly did not have much time for nonsense, he always treated us with genuine ... respect. As people who grew up under the boot-heel of soul-destroying racism, his humane and intelligent approach to us as brown socialists certainly had a deep effect on our sense of self-worth, to the extent that since then I have found myself incapable of tolerating to be treated by any lesser standard of comradeship and respect than Professor Cliff Slaughter showed us. Even when we were young and foolish, he treated us with full dignity and respect as thinking beings, necessary agents of change ...³⁵

Encounters in Acholiland and Oxford: the Anthropology of Frank Girling and Okot p’Bitek’ in Girling and p’Bitek, *Lawino’s People: the Acholi of Uganda*, (Wien: Verlag GmbH & Co.), pp. 7–47.

³⁴ Slaughter et al., *Women and the Social Revolution*. The inspirational story of Panduleni and Ndamona Kali is at pp. 57–62.

³⁵ Email message from Jade McClune to the author, 13 October, 2021: I am grateful for his permission to quote from it. McClune, a graduate in African studies from the University of Cape Town, is author, *inter alia*, of *Water Privatisation in Namibia: Creating a New Apartheid*, Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI), Windhoek, 2004, and (as Jade Lennon), ‘The Trouble with Water Rights in Namibia and the Revenge of the Neoliberals’, 2021 – a ‘history of how the ruling party and opposition sold the voters down the river during the height of the 2021 pandemic’ – accessed on 9 January 2022 at <https://www.academia.edu/s/7bae89d058?source=created_email>. He is a frequent contributor to *The Namibian* newspaper and campaigns for the Landless People’s Movement of Namibia.

IV

From the time he played his key role in the overdue destruction of the Healyite WRP and began work to overcome its sectarian legacy, Slaughter, assisted first by his discussions with Mészáros, and then by his fresh reading of Ernst Bloch (whose *The Principle of Hope*, he came to think of as ‘the most thorough and complete exposition’ in the twentieth century of Marx’s active and humanist materialism), devoted himself to the radical critique of existing Marxist theory and practice, including much of the thinking that had guided his own life. It culminated in the 2020 *Critique* essay, ‘More Than a Theory ...’, written in the passionate belief that political activism, however courageous and determined, if it is not informed by Marxist theoretical development, cannot guide the transition ‘beyond capital’ on which the future of human society depends. For Slaughter, Marx’s dictum that ‘the emancipation of the working class’ – and through that the emancipation of humanity as a whole – must be the task ‘of the working class itself’ remained a basic principle, although, in practice, it had been largely forgotten in the WRP.³⁶ But what he sometimes described as the ‘refoundation’ of Marxist theory, he argued, means beginning anew from a re-examination of its origins in the period of the 1843 ‘Theses on Feuerbach’; and recognising, Slaughter argued, that ‘Marx’s materialism has not been understood by Marxists [he included himself], and that, without a radical reorientation, [the] new beginning – essential today – is impossible.’³⁷

Further work on the challenge he had thus issued would certainly have followed. But it is now for others to decide to pick up the gauntlet Slaughter threw down. In Bloch’s excitingly diverse *The Principle of Hope*, I think he found inspiration: here was an approach to Marxist philosophy that embraced all human practice – human achievement – including artistic and scientific work; and elaborated a materialist way of confronting the future, the ‘not-yet’ that is immanent but yet to be realised in the ‘here-and-now’. Bloch recaptures for materialism the ‘active side’ that mechanical, contemplative materialism leaves open to idealism and subjectively determined political practice. As the oppressed and exploited masses are more and more forced into struggles for survival, and towards consciousness that it is the hegemonic system as a whole that is the obstacle to a world of social cooperation and real human relations (and indeed planetary survival), Marxists, participating where they

³⁶ ‘The International Workingmen’s Association General Rules, October 1864,’ first published in *The Bee-Hive* newspaper, November 12, 1864: accessed at <<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1864/rules.htm>> on 12 January 2022. That Slaughter’s thinking remained rooted in the working class and its struggles was reflected in one of his last exchanges, from a hospital bed, with Dave Temple, the former Durham miner and WRP member who now works to ensure that the annual Durham gala survives as a living embodiment of English working-class, oppositional culture and aspiration for independent class politics. Slaughter was delighted by the news that, notwithstanding the obliteration of the county’s coalfields, which had played a big part in his own family history, plans were in place for the gala to re-emerge strongly from its temporary suspension due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am grateful to Dave Temple for this, and other, information.

³⁷ Slaughter, ‘More Than a Theory ...’, pp. 549, 550, 553–555.

can, have a vital role to play in the orientation of such actions – which too often seem to come to a crescendo but then fade away – on a sustainable trajectory towards the essential goal, the radical social-metabolic transition ‘beyond capital’.

In February 2018, Slaughter, who did not believe in the value of autobiography, circulated what he called ‘a sort of profession of faith’, a document entitled ‘Some things I learned – some of them I learned later than I should have – on the rocky road’.³⁸ It consisted of aphorisms, some drawn from Bloch, including Hegel’s assertion that ‘Nothing great has been achieved without passion’;³⁹ and – a favourite he had used in the passages on aesthetics in his recent books – John Keats’s ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty.’⁴⁰ From Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* he chose: ‘The surest guide to the correctness of the path that women take is joy in the struggle. Revolution is the festival of the oppressed’; to which he added that this goes for men too, with the implication that men must learn it from women.⁴¹ In a moment of apparent sentimentality that might have seemed uncharacteristic to many who knew him only through politics, he included a popular song title, ‘Love is a many-splendored thing’.⁴²

For an epitaph (‘if I ever need one’) he turned again to Hegel: ‘The best bet is to keep a close eye on the advancing giant.’⁴³ And, of the principles he thought should act as a guide to a 21st-century life, ‘[t]he greatest,’ he asserted, ‘... is Hope!’ – hope ‘informed, inspired and sustained by determination to understand and to struggle to bring forth the shoots (until now obscured and suppressed by the rule of capital) of the flowering of the future community of free and equal individuals.’ It was with that principle in mind, I believe, that he wrote what proved to be his valedictory article in *Critique*.

³⁸ Cliff Slaughter, ‘Some things I have learnt ...’, email, 18 February 2018, to participants in the Movement for Socialism, a group established in the mid-1990s that has become in practice an online forum, to which Slaughter, who, from 1985 on, took very seriously a responsibility to participate in discussion with former WRP members, who, though wounded by the Healy experience, remained committed socialists, regularly contributed.

³⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 1832, vol. I: quoted by Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, p. 73.

⁴⁰ ‘When old age shall this generation waste,/ Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/ Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,/ ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’” John Keats, ‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’, 1819.

⁴¹ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970), p.330.

⁴² Some of his other ‘lessons’ reflected his delight in sharply perceptive working-class humour, such as the linguistically hybrid version of the Latin tag, ‘Nil desperandum’, used in ‘the engineers’ motto, “Nil desperandum carborundum” (‘don’t let the bastards grind you down’).

⁴³ The phrase concludes a passage in which Hegel asserts that ‘the world-spirit’ has commanded advance and that that command is being obeyed by an ‘entity [which] moves irresistibly forward like an armoured, tightly-closed phalanx with the same undiscernible movement with which the sun moves, through thick and thin ...’ Although the movement is unconscious for most of the ‘countless light troops ... flanked around it, for or against’, the best advice is ‘to keep an eye on the advancing giant.’ Hegel, letter to Niethammer, 1816; quoted by Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 195.

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My thanks to those who read previous drafts, often making corrections and/or valuable suggestions, or who responded to requests for information. Remaining mistakes are my responsibility, and I am aware of many lacunae in the background history referenced. This appreciation is a personal one that can only scratch the surface of a rich, richly contradictory, and sometimes bitterly contested, political life. I hope others will add to it. My primary purpose is to draw attention to Cliff Slaughter's open-ended theoretical legacy and to his call for a radical, forward-looking reassessment of how Marx's materialism was understood and practised in the twentieth century.

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Terry Brotherstone lectured in history at the University of Aberdeen, where he is now emeritus research fellow, from 1968 to 2008. He has published on a wide range of labour-history-related and other topics, including the oral documentation of the UK North Sea offshore industry. An essay on Stuart Hood, the Scottish Marxist who fought with the Italian partigiani in World War II and became a top BBC TV executive, radical media theorist and novelist appeared in *Stuart Hood: Twentieth-Century Partisan* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020). His previous obituary tributes in *Critique* – to the pioneering historian of Black Britain, Peter Fryer (1927-2006) and the Marxist philosopher István Mészáros (1932-2017) – appeared in 2007 and 2018 respectively. He served as honorary president of the University and College Union Scotland from 2007 to 2009 and on the General Council of the Scottish TUC in 2009-10; and on the board of Newbattle Abbey, Scotland's “second-chance” adult education college from 2009 to 2021.