



The perils of schadenfreude

RIGHTWINGERS ARE SCAREDY-CATS! It's official. Scientists at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have demonstrated that the supporters of the death penalty, obedience and patriotism scare more easily than those who favour compromise, premarital sex and gay marriage. According to findings published in the journal *Science* softies with nasty views are paradoxically more disturbed by nastiness than much nicer liberal types. A spider on a face spooks 'em, an image of a bloody injured person disorients 'em, and a festering wound crawling with maggots, sets their teeth chattering. Their disciplinarian resolve is shattered by sudden loud noises. Lefties, by contrast, are much more robust; used to facing the nasty schemes of those on the right they are stoical in the face of horror.

And so it was last week when weaker souls, like the former Lehman banker who, trembling in the whirlwind of bankruptcy, delighted us with the reflection that she could "no longer buy Gucci". This induced a warm glow in many of us, like the cheer we felt at the predicament of distressed parents struggling to pay school fees. We love the idea that they are being forced by flint-faced school bursars to sell jewels, horses, and houses in fashionable districts, before being allowed to ask the old ivy-clad school for discounts or time-to-pay. No, it is a time for tough choices; exclusive private schools are a *choice* for the

rich, not a God-given *right* for the children of failed bankers.

Who could not risk a smile at the pictures of hapless bankers, carrying those cardboard boxes crammed with litter from their desks as they left the gleaming offices in Canary Wharf? The delicious images of the dazed crowd outside Lehman's in suits or shirt-sleeves, shorn of bonuses and the spring in their step, hanging about aimlessly in the street or hysterically turning the canteen into a bar as they drowned their sorrows at ten in the morning. At long last the *loadsamoney* buggers have got their comeuppance.

As the *Socialist Worker* wisely observed: the crisis of capitalism was "entirely predictable", its editors could barely conceal their pleasure as they warned of the millions who, unable to repay their debts, would lose their homes and their jobs. While world leaders were in denial about the scale of the crisis, the paper enthused, "Our only solution is to fight back." They did not spell out quite what *fighting back* might involve, the details can be left to later. The mood is all that matters for now.

Hard left groups will not be alone in welcoming the slump. Caught between ill-defined alarm at impending disorder, and intense pleasure at the failure of the market, many on the left will be deliriously happy about "the collapse of capitalism". It was always indefensible. Last year the Lehman Brothers' boss, Richard Fuld, was paid \$45 million, this was in addition to almost half a billion dollars he earned over the previous fourteen years. Thirty years ago corporate chiefs earned around 30 or 40 times more than ordinary workers, last year they earned 344 times average pay. But don't grumble, they're worth every penny because they are world class and they beat the competition into a cocked hat. Or at least they did, until it became clear last week that most of these titans of industry were being paid around £8,000 an hour for driving their companies into Carey Street.

Still, we must not be downhearted, with *the rising organic composition of capital* and *the tendency of the*

rate of profit to fall the opportunities for those on the left to scare the wits out of jumpy rightwingers are almost limitless. Mass unemployment, widespread poverty and violence should furnish us with enough loud noises, dazed and blooded people, and spiders on the face, to terrify any sample of rightwing disciplinarians that researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln might wish to assemble.

I would also urge these researchers to look with some urgency into the recent vogue in Italy for donning fascist era uniforms, re-enacting fascist military parades, and fingerprinting Gypsies. Because, it's perhaps worth remembering that those on the right have not always been frightened of loud noises and horror. Indeed, at times, reactionaries seem to have positively relished the sight of blooded and disoriented people.

I was reminded of this problem last week when my pleasure at the closure of Moscow's stock exchange and Medvedev's corresponding discomfort turned rapidly into alarm as I learned that these events had greatly strengthened Russia's nationalists in the Duma and elsewhere. It appears that these latter day *Black Hundreds* are not averse to a spot of horror. With chanting priests, billowing holy smoke, and icons gleaming in candlelit corners, Russia's nationalists are committed to hanging, obedience and patriotism. They don't seem fearful of frightfulness at all. Indeed, they have a long tradition of inflicting humiliation, terror, and murder on those foolish enough to frighten them. The modern doyens of Russia's *Holy Brigade* would make a great *control group* for researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

We are living through extraordinary times. The surreptitious bliss or the brazen joy of many anti-capitalists at Wall Street Crash II is rather like the *steerage* and third class passengers on the *Titanic* bursting into song and dance at the prospect of the first class staterooms and their bejewelled occupants descending into the abyss. Capitalist society is not an ill-fated Concorde burning over Paris or even an

executive jet with engine trouble. It's troubles are our troubles, its catastrophes are ones through which we must live.

The prospect of an incompetent but resurgent left frightening the wits out of a fearful right is certainly to be feared, feared more even than the idea that Frank Furedi, in an excess of zeal for the resurgent prospects for proletarian dictatorship, might attempt to re-float the Revolutionary Communist Party.

In a world where George W. Bush and Gordon Brown engage in the wholesale nationalisation of banks and impose state control of the financial sector completely mad schemes and schemas are likely to issue from those on the left. But times are not in fact propitious for the promotion of wholesale nationalisation, with or without *workers' control*. Toying with the idea of overthrowing capitalism will merely strengthen the fearful right as it has done on many occasions in the past. Consequently, the loud noises and horror to which millions are now likely to be exposed should lead us, not to plot the final solution to *the problem of the bourgeoisie*, but to strive to maintain open and measured political stability in opposition to fearful calls from the right for order and discipline.