

CULTURE WARS

Culture war ‘Marxism’: The Revolutionary Communist Party diaspora and the Conservative Party

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The influence of alumni of the Revolutionary Communist Party— especially that of Boris Johnson’s former adviser Munira Mirza – upon the Conservative leadership has been much remarked upon in recent years. Rather than an unlikely alliance brought together by the Brexit campaign, however, this relationship has deeper roots within the Conservative intellectual ecosystem. If the Conservatives have often lacked ideas beyond the will to power, the RCP has never lacked for ideas. Nevertheless, the post-Brexit political landscape has created a greater degree of alignment between the two.

In early February 2022, Munira Mirza, the head of the Downing Street policy unit and a long-time aide to Boris Johnson, resigned over the prime minister’s use of a far-right smear at PMQs. In heated exchanges amid the ‘party gate’

scandal, Johnson had levelled the accusation that Labour leader Keir Starmer had failed to prosecute the paedophile Jimmy Savile during his time as Director of Public Prosecutions. Mirza decried this as ‘inappropriate’, and wrote that the PM had ‘let [him]self down by making a scurrilous accusation’.¹ Unsurprisingly, the departure of such a senior aide attracted media attention; Justin Parkinson penned a short profile piece on Mirza for the BBC. In it, he described her early life and career in three short sentences:

Born in 1978 to parents who had come to the UK from Pakistan, Ms Mirza went to a comprehensive school before studying English at Oxford University. While there she joined the Revolutionary Communist Party, but during her twenties, frustrated at what she thought to be a lack of free thought on the far left, she went through an ideological transformation. Having completed a PhD in sociology at the University of Kent, she started work for Policy Exchange.²

The basic details of this are broadly accurate. Mirza did attend those institutions, and she did hold those jobs, and she was a member of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). Parkinson’s profile, however, is an exercise in being right on the details while completely and utterly missing the bigger picture. Being in the RCP was not, for Mirza, a brief flirtation with student leftism, a fun detail to add colour to the profile of a Conservative Party apparatchik. It has rather been a key through line and organising ideology of Mirza’s politics, and hints at the wider, stranger story of how an ostensibly communist grouping that supposedly disbanded in 1997 came to hold not insignificant sway in the contemporary Conservative Party. Understanding the group’s history and how it has come to stalk the corridors of power gives us valuable insight into the internal world of the party that has run the country for a dozen years and counting.

Roots of the RCP

The Revolutionary Communist Party began life as a split from the International Socialist group (now the Socialist Workers’ Party, or SWP). It went through several iterations across the 1970s before, at the end of the decade, emerging as the RCP. Then, as now, its intellectual leading light – and de facto leader – was Frank Furedi. Furedi was born in Hungary in 1947; his family fled to Canada in 1956 as a result of the revolution. He came to the UK in the late 1960s and quickly became active in Trotskyist politics. He received a PhD in sociology from the University of Kent in the 1980s, and has been at Kent ever since, where he is now Professor of Sociology. His tenure there has made the institution something of a centre for the RCP. Munira Mirza, naturally, was Furedi’s PhD student there in the 00s; she published a book based on her PhD thesis in 2012, about government approaches to cultural policy.³

Nominally Trotskyist, at its outset the RCP looked like a small sect of the kind that very often live and die without ever troubling the halls of power or making it out of the footnotes of little read books about the British left. Through the 1980s, however, it began to mark itself out as a distinctly contrarian organisation, possessed of somewhat different politics than you might expect of a group called the Revolutionary Communist Party. They counter-picketed striking nurses and opposed sanctions on apartheid South Africa; in 1987, they released a pamphlet called *The Truth about the AIDS Panic* which argued that the public health campaigns around AIDS were simply instruments of social control by a state interested in interfering in people's sex lives.

If we could see the shape of things to come in the RCP's early years, it was in the 1990s, when leftist sects of all stripes struggled to position themselves in a world without a Communist superpower, that they came to be the organisation we know today. The questions arising from the collapse of the Soviet Union provided grist for the mill of the RCP's newly established magazine, *Living Marxism (LM)*. *Living Marxism* set out the stall for a set of politics that had reasonably little to do with Trotskyism or Marxism, but which were possessed of a kind of reactionary coherence. Attempting to describe the RCP's politics in conventional political language is somewhat difficult; they are somewhere close to libertarians (and often identify themselves as such), albeit ones possessed of some desire to understand the world through a loosely Marxist class framework, a passion for futuristic technology, and a contrarian streak a mile wide. They advocated for grand absolutes of free speech, and in favour of genetically modified crops and nuclear power. It was their reactionary contrarianism, however, which defined their project and which was ultimately to be the magazine's undoing: if the mainstream British press were in favour of it, *Living Marxism* was against it.

Genocide denial is such a profound act that it seems bizarre to conclude that anyone would do it out of sheer counter-suggestibility; nonetheless, that seems to have been *Living Marxism's* primary motivation as, through the 90s, the magazine became increasingly vocal about what they saw as the mainstream British media's anti-Serb bias. This culminated in the publication of an article by Thomas Diechmann which took as its subject an ITN report on the Bosnian Serb run concentration camp at Trnopolje, which showed images of emaciated Bosniak prisoners. Published in 1997 but commenting on images from 1992, the article was titled 'The picture that fooled the world'. Diechmann, a German freelance journalist who was also, far from incidentally, a media expert hired by the defence of Duska Tadic, a former member of a Bosnian Serb paramilitary group who was tried for and convicted of crimes against humanity, alleged that the images had been misleadingly framed. Diechmann claimed that a fence had been filmed so as to suggest those behind it were imprisoned in the camp when, he contended, they were not. ITN took legal action against *Living Marxism* – then edited by RCP stalwart Mick Hume – and won their libel case in 2000.⁴

After the trial

The costs from this court decision effectively shuttered *Living Marxism*, and from 1997 the RCP as a formal organisation had largely disbanded- or claimed to have disbanded. As a force in British politics, however, it was very much not going anywhere. Hume and the team behind *Living Marxism* founded *Spiked* in 2000; that is, pretty much immediately after *LM* was forced to fold. Their new venture was online, but its politics remained consistent, as did the people involved. This period directly post-*LM* also saw the establishment of the Institute of Ideas, a think tank run by longtime RCP activist Claire Fox, operating out of *LM*'s former offices and animated by very much the same spirit.⁵

Spiked's opposition to environmental activists and to what they viewed as the anti-humanist moral panic over climate change became more pronounced as green issues came increasingly to the political fore (the wheels of this opposition, reporting from 2018 found, had been greased by funding from the Koch Brothers).⁶ They became if anything even more vivid in their convictions on 'free speech' after Brendan O'Neill took over as editor from Hume in 2007, and in 2015 began to publish a ranking of UK universities by censorship. For most people, having one's publication sued out of existence after having denied a genocide would be something one was keen to keep on the down low; Hume and others involved in *Spiked* viewed their previous iteration's fate as something of a badge of pride. In his 2015 book *Trigger Warning: Is the fear of being offensive killing free speech?*, Hume wrote that *LM* had been 'forced to close in 2000 after being sued under England's atrocious libel laws'.⁷

The post-libel trial associations and diffusions of the *Living Marxism* network are best described by Jenny Turner, in her 2010 *London Review of Books* article on the 'Battle of Ideas' debating festival and the world around the RCP.⁸ She lists myriad organisations tied to this network – the Institute of Ideas, Sense about Science, the Manifesto Club, WorldWrite, Audacity.org, the Modern Movement, Parents with Attitude, Debating Matters, Young Journalists' Academy – before concluding that although the people involved and instincts on show provide evidence of a clear link and common ancestry, 'these days, though, it isn't clear what the Continuity RCP is after, except that someone, somewhere, really likes setting things up'. Since Turner wrote this in 2010, the political agenda of these networks has become a little clearer; her piece however remains required reading for any interested in the world of the RCP for so clearly demonstrating the way in which those involved operate, battling in their separate organisations with remarkable synchronicity of purpose and ideals, and upon occasion 'sitting on panels together, pretending they don't already know each other'.⁹

Into the Conservative mainstream

It is around this point, in the early 2000s, when we begin to see Munira Mirza appear on the scene. She first wrote for *Spiked* in 2006 (an article titled 'Let's have a heated debate', subheaded, 'Officialdom's calls for a 'gentle, nuanced' debate about race, veils and multiculturalism is just another way of policing public discussion') – her bio listing her as a 'writer and researcher based in London' – and was a founding member of the Manifesto Club. Having written for *Living Marxism* while at university, she was a frequent writer for *Spiked* until 2008, weighing in on the place of Muslims in society, cultures of victimhood, diversity, creativity, and whether or not modern art is a left wing conspiracy (answer: kind of).

Her disappearance as a regular *Spiked* contributor can likely be attributed to a change in employment; Mirza joined Boris Johnson's team upon his election as Mayor of London in 2008, and largely disappeared into the backrooms of power for the next dozen or so years, first at City Hall and later at Downing Street. To suggest, however, as Justin Parkinson does, that Mirza's time away from *Spiked* and the more public elements of post RCP world of the RCP constituted an ideological shift rather than a distinct continuity is to very much grasp the wrong end of the stick.

Trotskyists, famously, love doing entryism; that is, joining organisations to steer their politics and direction from within. While it is a stretch to call the RCP as it has existed since the fall of the Soviet Union Trotskyist (even in its earlier years, 'edge-lord' would probably have been a more accurate description of their politics), a passion for entryism remains; a passion which has seen the RCP pull off the most impressive feat in its nearly half a century long history. Namely, successfully infiltrating the Conservative Party.

Mirza's appointment at Downing Street did attract some comment, with *The Guardian* and other mainstream news outlets running pieces which highlighted her RCP connections. What commentary there was, however, did tend to be couched in the language of post-2016 hyperbolic exceptionalism that typifies much of the comment on Johnson's Tories. The suggestion in these comments is that contemporary Tories are a Frankenstein's monster of right-wing populism, with the RCP just one of many bolted-on, invasive components (the bulk of which stemmed from the world around the leave campaigns).

The RCP's influence on the Conservatives, however, has far deeper roots; a more fitting place to begin might be around 2005, when one begins to be able to see the network cropping up in the world of Conservative policy and media. This was the year that saw Munira Mirza take up a position at Policy Exchange, where she worked until 2007. The leading right-wing think tank did large amounts of the intellectual legwork and policy formation for the Conservative Party under Cameron (and up to

the present day); Mirza worked there until she joined Johnson at City Hall, and wrote a report on cultural management (the subject of her PhD) and a report titled *Living Apart Together: British Muslims and the Paradox of Multiculturalism* in 2006 and 2007 respectively.¹⁰ Josie Appleton, an RCP associate who co-founded The Manifesto Club with Mirza, also contributed to Mirza's Policy Exchange report in 2006. Elsewhere, Frank Furedi and Jennie Bristow – an academic now based at Canterbury Christ Church University, who has written for *Spiked* since its inception – put out a report for the Conservative think tank Civitas in 2008. Titled *Licensed to Hug*, it argued that increased child protection measures were interfering with social relationships.¹¹ Bristow and Furedi published another report (this time entitled *The Social Cost of Litigation*) with another prominent right wing think tank, the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies, in 2012.¹² The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) included Frank Furedi's books in their recommended reading section in 2005 and 2006. In 2005 Furedi contributed a chapter to *Decadence*, a book of political commentary published by the Social Affairs Unit, a subsidiary of the IEA.¹³

Policy relating to education is a particular hub for the RCP network; in part because universities are where many of the debates about free speech over which they obsess happen, and in part, I suspect, for the simple reason that Frank Furedi and many around him work in and around the higher education sector. People write about what they know, after all. In 2018 Joanna Williams, a *Spiked* columnist, left the University of Kent (where she was head of their Centre for the Study of Higher Education), to become the head of the new Education and Skills Unit at Policy Exchange, a unit that at its inception consisted of Williams and Tom Richmond, who had been an advisor to Michael Gove during his time as Education Secretary.¹⁴ Gove, who was the founding chairman of Policy Exchange in 2002, also had the later infamous Dominic Cummings as his chief advisor in this period. Claire Fox, who commented that prior to the Leave campaign she had known Cummings slightly through 'education world', was ennobled in July of 2020. A 2021 article by Matthew D'Ancona reports that one Dougie Smith is 'the most powerful figure in today's Conservative Party when it comes to drawing up lists of parliamentary candidates and, increasingly, vetting public appointments'.¹⁵ Smith has never been an RCP member – he was active in student Conservative libertarian groups in the 1980s, and worked for James Goldsmith, of Referendum Party fame, in the 1990s – but the long-time Conservative fixer has been a Downing Street advisor since Cameron, and, crucially, is married to Mirza, who he met during her time at Policy Exchange. Smith is reportedly a friend of James Forsyth, the editor of the *Spectator*, the prominent Conservative magazine for which Mirza, Josie Appleton, Mick Hume, Tiffany Jenkins, Claire Fox, Joanna Williams, Brendan O'Neill and presumably also other RCP-linked figures have written.¹⁶ Funnily enough, Furedi himself has only written for the magazine once: in 2005, towards the end of Boris Johnson's tenure as editor.¹⁷

I present you with this densely knotted web of connections not to suggest some grand conspiracy. I am not claiming that it has been the RCP at the wheel of the Conservative Party all along. I present it rather to indicate that the influence of the RCP has been for some time a feature and not a bug of Conservative politics, very much present in the intellectual and policy creation world of the party. The network this article discusses is small, but in recent years they have been exerting their influence on a small group of people: that is, an unusually cliqueish Downing Street set, with close personal ties to the political media.

The RCP network – particularly Mirza and Furedi – are clever, ideological, driven people, with the ardent commitment of former sectists. Free speech is a cause in which they genuinely believe; they have ideas about culture and the world, even if their perspective is one that refuses 'to countenance the existence of psychic conflict or confusion' around the complicated issues they debate.¹⁸ Their stance on abortion is an interesting case study; this is an issue on which many libertarians slip up and reveal ideological inconsistency, commitment to free choice *but*; not so the RCP, who take just as combative a stance on this issue as they do on issues more palatable to mainstream conservatives. (Furedi's wife, Anne Furedi, is the admirably bullish Chief Executive of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and a former RCP member.)

The way in which the RCP network managed to seep into the Conservative intellectual ecosystem in the Cameron years suggests, first, a degree of basic compatibility with Conservative ideas; however, it also suggests a paucity in the Tory party's homegrown intellectual scene, a lack in its internal milieu that outside groups with the right inclinations could step into. In short, the Conservatives lacked ideas beyond the will to power; the RCP has never lacked for ideas.

Brexit and beyond

The fact of their quiet establishment in Conservative think tank world would probably have gone largely uncommented upon if the political weather had not changed quite dramatically. Parties, much like people, can choose to develop, or neglect, certain latent tendencies. Sometimes, however, events bring those tendencies to the fore; the political world created by the success of the campaign to leave the European Union in 2016 saw the RCP's worldview and instincts begin to align more and more with those of an increasingly populist, Eurosceptic Conservative Party.

The RCP network was overwhelmingly in favour of leaving. Claire Fox, after Furedi himself, is probably the single figure most associated with the Revolutionary Communist Party. Originally a social worker, she was at the heart of the RCP for many years and was one of the publishers of *Living Marxism*. Fox was elected as a

Brexit Party MEP in 2019 (at an election where the Brexit Party ate the Conservative vote nearly whole, with 29 seats to the Conservatives' 19). She had courted by figures around Nigel Farage to stand for the party after consistently speaking out in favour of leaving in various media appearances.¹⁹

The 2019 Conservative Party platform was one that centred 'getting Brexit done'. It was economically populist, going big on regional investment and casting off austerity. The success of this electoral strategy saw them take a swathe of historically Labour seats in the midlands and north – the so called 'Red Wall'. The strategy frontloaded the idea of Brexit as an issue that pitted elites against the people; an argument that gelled very well indeed with the culture war meets reductionist class analysis perspective of the RCP. Frank Furedi commented on 24 June 2016 that it was 'important to understand [that] Brexit is fundamentally a vote against the political class and the imposition of their cultural outlook on society'.²⁰

The Conservative Party in 2019 found itself a decade in power but needing to reinvent itself as anti-establishment to win. To suggest that the RCP were the whole reason why the Conservatives ended up looking and acting the way they did in the years after the referendum would be to overstate their influence. This being said, the RCP-ish pose struck so consistently by the Johnson government – seeking to portray those who oppose them, be it the Labour Party or those campaigning for a second referendum, as identitarian, out-of-touch cultural elites – cannot have come about through sheer coincidence, considering just how many RCP associates were in a position to influence, directly or indirectly, the party's position. You can see traces of the RCP in many of the government's actions. The Sewell Report – of which Mirza was a commissioner – denying the existence of institutional racism is among the most obvious examples of this, but we might also look to Communities Secretary Kemi Badenoch's denunciation of critical race theory in parliament or Boris Johnson's decision to open an address to his MPs with a joke about trans people ('Good evening ladies and gentlemen, or as Keir Starmer would put it, people who are assigned female or male at birth').

Mirza is now out of Downing Street; those familiar with Frank Furedi's 2013 book *Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust: The Jimmy Savile Scandal*, widely condemned as tasteless, might have reason to doubt that sincerity of her given reasons for resigning. In or out, however, it is clear that Mirza and her ideological ilk are not leaving Conservative politics anytime soon; the question, then, is not whether the RCP network is influential, but what this group of people noted for their ability to pick up on cultural scents will do with this influence.²¹

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Notes

- 1 See James Forsyth, 'Exclusive: Boris's Policy Chief quits over Jimmy Savile slur', 3 February 2022: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/exclusive-boris-s-policy-chief-quits-over-jimmy-savile-slur>.
- 2 Justin Parkinson, 'Munira Mirza: The student radical who became Boris's brain', 4 February 2022: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-60257702>.
- 3 Munira Mirza, *The Politics of Culture: A Case for Universalism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2012.
- 4 David Campbell, 'Atrocity, memory, photography: Imaging the concentration camps of Bosnia – the Case of ITN vs *Living Marxism*, Part 1', *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol 1, No 1, 2002, pp1-33; and 'Part 2', *JHR*, Vol 1, No 2, pp143-172.
- 5 David Pallister, John Vidal and Kevin Maguire, 'Life after *Living Marxism*', *Guardian*, 8 July 2000.
- 6 George Monbiot, 'How US billionaires are fuelling the hard-right cause', *Guardian*, 7 December 2018.
- 7 Mick Hume, *Trigger Warning: Is the fear of being offensive killing free speech?*, William Collins, 2015.
- 8 Jenny Turner, 'Who are they?', *London Review of Books*, Vol 32, No 3, 8 July 2010.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Munira Mirza, *Living Apart Together: British Muslims and the Paradox of Multiculturalism*, London, Policy Exchange 2007; and *Culture Vultures: Is UK Arts Policy Damaging the Arts?*, London, Policy Exchange 2006.
- 11 Frank Furedi and Jennie Bristow, *Licensed to Hug*, London, Civitas 2008.
- 12 Frank Furedi and Jennie Bristow, *The Social Cost of Litigation*, London, Centre for Policy Studies 2012.
- 13 IEA website, see: <https://iea.org.uk/publications/recommended-reading/the-politics-of-fear-beyond-left-and-right> ; <https://iea.org.uk/publications/recommended-reading/where-have-all-the-intellectuals-gone> (accessed 12 April 2022); Digby Anderson (ed.), *Decadence*, London, Social Affairs Unit 2005.
- 14 'Policy Exchange announces new Education and Skills Team', Policy Exchange, 4 September 2018: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/news/policy-exchange-announces-new-education-and-skills-team/> (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 15 Matthew D'Ancona, 'The Second Couple', *Tortoise*, June 2021: <https://www.tortoisemedia.com/audio/the-second-couple/> (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 16 James Tapfield, 'Are team Rishi making their move?', *Daily Mail*, 3 February 2022.
- 17 Frank Furedi, 'The Age of Unreason', *Spectator*, 19 November 2005.
- 18 Turner, 'Who are They?'.
- 19 Claire Fox, *Brexit Witness Archive, UK in a Changing Europe*: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/brexit-witness-archive/claire-fox/>.
- 20 See: <https://twitter.com/furedibyte/status/746213389580410880?lang=en>.
- 21 Turner, 'Who are They?'.