

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



# Review: **Imagine** by Sheridan and McCombes

**One Step Forward, Two Steps Back**

Anarcho

Anarcho

Review: **Imagine** by Sheridan and McCombes

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

July 24, 2008

Retrieved on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021 from

[anarchism.pageabode.com](http://anarchism.pageabode.com)

A review of **Imagine** by Tommy Sheridan and Alan  
McCombes, the (then) leaders of the **Scottish Socialist Party**.

An attempt by Trotskyists to become libertarian sounding are  
not very convincing.

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

July 24, 2008



# Contents

Socialism? . . . . .	9
Stalinism . . . . .	12
In the dark . . . . .	13
Russia and Spain . . . . .	14
Getting there . . . . .	15
Counter-revolution . . . . .	18
In conclusion . . . . .	20

ine” a socialist society, but they fail. Secondly, for *Imagine* socialism comes about via the ballot box. As such, this is a retreat from Lenin back to Marx at his worse. It forgets the last 130 years and resurrects social democracy in its original form. The idea that the current state has to be smashed in simply missing, as is the idea that the framework of the socialist society is created from the combat organisations of the working class forged in the class struggle.

*Imagine* therefore achieves the impossible. It unites Lenin and Lennon – by making both spin in their graves!

If they had waited for a “socialist government” to act for them, then Mussolini and Franco would have taken power as easily as Hitler did.

## In conclusion

Sheridan and McCombes end by asking “*What side are you on?*” and present the duality of “*Capitalism or socialism?*” Looking at this book, the obvious answer must be “**Neither.**” Anarchists remember what socialism is meant to be about, namely the abolition of the wages system. We know that the state must be abolished if we truly want a genuine “grassroots democracy.” We recognise that social democratic tactics result in reformist ends and that electioneering destroys constructive Socialist activity in our workplaces and communities. Rather than building self-managed organs of working class power, it undermines working class self-help, self-organisation and self-activity by spreading the delusion that salvation comes from above.

As such, the only real choice is this: Libertarian Communism or some form of capitalism. While Sheridan and McCombes are right to argue that “*one thing that differentiates conscious socialism from militant trade unionism, or from radical environmentalism, is that we have a clear goal ... we also need vision,*” (pp. 158–9) the vision they present is only a benign version of capitalism. We can do so much better!

In summary, *Imagine* is a step forward in the sense that the imagery it involves is libertarian sounding. It is no coincidence that they dwell more on the Spanish Revolution than the Russian. The highly centralised, party run, to-down Leninist scheme inspires few these days. However, it is definitely two steps backward. Firstly, because its libertarian rhetoric hides a statist and capitalist core. As such, the break with Leninism is more apparent than real. They may want to “imag-

**Imagine:** *A Socialist Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Tommy Sheridan and Alan McCombes, Rebel Inc., £7.99

For the few that do not know, Tommy Sheridan is the Scottish Socialist Party’s leader and sole Member of the Scottish Parliament. He reached public awareness during the poll tax revolt, playing a leading role in the Strathclyde, Scottish and British Anti-Poll Tax Federations. Back then both he and McCombes were leading members of Militant. With the expulsion of that group from Labour, it split and the largest faction subsequently became an independent party. In Scotland, undoubtedly due to their activity against the Poll Tax, they have managed to form a viable, if small, political party which has had some impact in elections (indeed it regularly saves its deposits) and the SWP in Scotland has merged with it. Thanks to PR, Sheridan got into the Scottish Parliament.

Their book is a statement of the mainstream political vision of the SSP, their argument for and vision of socialism within an independent Scotland. *Imagine* is, of course, John Lennon’s classic song about communism. While obviously seeking association with that vision of true socialism, Sheridan and McCombes’ book has more in common with Lenin. In fact, it reminded me a lot of Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. Like Lenin’s book, *Imagine* combines a heavy dose of libertarian sounding rhetoric with a typically statist foundation.

Which brings us to the crux of the problem. The book has a dual nature, it almost has two souls. On the one hands, the politics of book clearly show the legacy of Trotskyism, in the tradition that the SSP has come from (namely *Militant*). On the other, its positive vision borrows a lot from the libertarian tradition. Indeed, Sheridan and McCombs actually at one point call their vision “*democratic libertarian socialism.*” (p. 171) Perhaps this is to be expected. With the collapse of Stalinism, the centralised, party run vision of “socialism” expounded by Trotskyism lost any appeal it may have held. Equally, in this age of green protest and ecological awareness, the Leninist “big is

beautiful” message would fall on deaf ears (chapter 8 is obviously aimed at greens). Lenin’s vision of enormous state capitalist trusts and banks constituting the framework of “socialism” is hardly part of the green “small is beautiful” tradition!

As such, *Imagine*’s vision of socialism has a superficial feeling of Bakunin and Kropotkin to it. Socialism, we are informed, “*is about creating grassroots democracy from the bottom upwards. In a genuine socialist system, there could be mass decision-making on all the big issues through democratic referenda. There could also be maximum decentralisation of power right down to local communities and workplaces.*” This means that the “*mass of the population ... decides to take matters into their own hands ... Passive support is not enough ... socialism had to be built from the bottom up rather than from the top down.*” Indeed, “*Socialism is about moving away from **representative** democracy — in which other people take all the important decisions on your behalf — towards **direct** democracy.*” Economically, the anarchist vision is also implied: “*Instead of centralised planning by a remote bureaucracy there could be decentralised democratic planning using advanced information technology.*” (pp. 166–7, p. 154, p. 166, pp. 190–1)

All good anarchist imagery. That the rhetoric of the libertarian version of socialism has (yet again!) been appropriated by Marxists should not blind us. The Bolsheviks did something similar in 1917, appropriating anarchistic slogans to gain popular influence while, at the same time, giving them a radically different meaning and quickly forgetting them once the party is in power. As such, there is a tendency when reading Leninist inspired books to dismiss them out of hand. After all, the Bolsheviks promised a radical democracy and quickly undermined it to preserve party power. The Bolshevik gerrymandering and disbanding of soviets in early 1918 and subsequent advocating of party dictatorship and one-man management should be enough to justify this cynical position. But what of *Imagine*? Is the anarchist rhetoric genuine or does it cover traditional

*disruption and destabilisation by big business” and “creating a dense network of democratic committees in every community, every workplace, every university, to involve hundreds of thousands of people in the task of transforming society.”* (pp. 148–9) Ignoring the slight contradiction with their claims that some big business would remain untouched under the “socialist” government (indeed, it would still make a profit!) and that society would be run from the bottom up rather than from the top-down (which is what the government taking “full control over the direction of the economy” means), their arguments are less than convincing.

The mass support of the Spanish population for the Republic did not stop Franco in 1936. Indeed, it was only the existence of the anti-parliamentarian CNT which had already organised a dense network of union assemblies which ensured that the coup was defeated in two-thirds of the country. Waiting for the “*future socialist government*” to create such a network will ensure the victory of any attempted coup. Equally, unless workers were prepared to act for themselves to expropriate capital and place it under workers’ self-management, the economy would grind to a halt while people waited for the politicians to do anything constructive (assuming they knew anything about the economy, never mind work, in the first place). Simply put, “a dense network” of self-managed working class organs is what required to create a revolution in the first place and cannot be considered as its result.

For anarchists, we must create this “dense network” now by organising outside and against parliament and using direct action and solidarity to win reforms under capitalism. That this strategy is the best can be seen from history. While in Germany Hitler took power with little or no opposition, in Italy and Spain the fascists had to fight long and hard to gain power. This was due to the influence of the anarchists who encouraged working class people to look to their own power and organisation to affect change rather than vote for leaders to act for them.

## Counter-revolution

Being self-proclaimed revolutionaries, we should expect some discussion of the dangers of counter-revolution. However, *Imagine* essentially dismisses the idea that we have anything to worry about.

As regards economic pressure, they argue that while “*money can be shuffled around from one country to another ... an entire financial system employing 100,000 skilled and trained workers cannot just be dismantled and moved abroad.*” (p. 197) But it does not have to be. A capital strike or flight would do the job quite effectively without having to worry about dismantling anything. The workers in this sector, without money, have nothing to do and would be made redundant. Controls of capital movements can be escaped from and pressure applied by international markets. Ironically, Sheridan and McCombe point out that the state planned coups against Labour Governments and that pressure from the IMF and big business ensured that Labour did what it was told in the 1960s and 70s (p. 64) yet this becomes irrelevant when discussing a SSP government!

This is also the case for military invasion as well as a military coup. They point to the example of Chile, arguing that it was “*an island of democracy surrounded by military dictatorship*” and so we need not fear a such a fate in Scotland. (pp. 147–8) It would be churlish to note that Chile was such an “island” simply because its neighbours had seen, like Chile, elected reformist governments overthrown by military coups!

However, this does not stop them raising the possibility that the ruling class may not fight fair. They acknowledge that “*Chilean big business*” had “*brought the country to a state of chaos*” and “*prepared*” the ground for the military junta. However, they argue that a “*future socialist government in Scotland could cut across the threat of reaction by building and sustaining mass popular support at home and abroad*” by “*very swiftly taking full control over the direction of the economy to prevent*

Leninist politics? Sadly, the answer is sadly all too clear — anarchist rhetoric is being used to freshen up the stale politics of state socialism.

The incompatible nature of the two visions of socialism is made clear, ironically enough, when the book attempts to paint its tradition as libertarian. The authors quote Trotsky approvingly to prove socialism would not harm the liberty of artists: “*Art must find its own road ... The methods of Marxism are not its methods ... The field of art is not one in which the party is called to command.*” (p. 219) So in which fields *is* the party “*called to command*”? And how does this fit in with “*democratic libertarian socialism*”? Simply put, it cannot. Ultimately, *Imagine* is based on the fallacy that popular power can be delegated without being destroyed, that socialism can be combined with the state.

For all the talk of direct democracy and from the bottom up, *Imagine’s* “*future socialist society*” would still have “*parliamentary representatives*,” although, we are informed, they will not be a “*privileged elite*” with high salaries but “*paid the average salary of a skilled worker.*” (p. 166) Looking at local democracy, it would be based on the “*existing network of community councils*” and this “*community government*” would be “*accountable to local people.*” (p. 171) The idea that working class people could manage their own fates directly via federations of popular assemblies is nowhere to be seen. Rather, the vision is one based on electing representatives who would, obviously, have the real power. As such, the key aim of socialism (namely equality) is violated from the start. Some would have more power than others, a few would govern the many.

They do argue that “*without grassroots democracy ... the result will be bureaucratism, oppression, and dictatorship.*” Unfortunately they weaken this concern for democracy by adding the rider that this “*grassroots democracy*” was one “*in which the people as a whole have ultimate say over the running of society.*” (p. 168) Having “*ultimate say*” does not mean “*the people*” actu-

ally run society directly, rather it means the opposite, namely that “the people” simply designate its rulers who actually do run it.

It is for this reason that anarchists think it is naive to try and combine representative institutions with directly democratic ones. Like oil and water, the two do not mix. Either the organs of popular self-management (such as community and workplace assemblies) are in power or the representatives (a handful of people) are. To blur this issue by confusing “accountability” with real participation in decision making means failing to understand the dynamics of socialism. Instead of representative structures, anarchists argue for popular assemblies to be linked federally by assemblies of mandated, recallable delegates. Assemblies at every level would elect action committees to implement decisions but these would have strict mandates and perform an administrative role.

*Imagine*’s attempts to inject some participation miss the point. “Direct democracy via electronic voting and online referenda,” they assert, “is no longer the stuff of science fiction.” In a socialist Scotland we would have “the right” to “organise petitions to demand a referendum on any ... issue.” All of which drives home the fact that the working class would not be managing society — but they can “petition” those who do (namely the “managers and administrators” would make “routine decisions” which are “naturally delegated to” them). (p. 170) So when they argue for a “hi-tech socialism,” that “cutting edge technology” will allow “direct democracy to flourish for the first time since ancient tribal society” they fail to understand what makes direct democracy special. (p. 75) There is more to “direct democracy” than organising referendum, even “hi-tech” ones. Isolated individuals saying yes or no is not much better than isolated individuals putting a cross on a bit of paper. Tribal society was based on community discussion and decision making, as were the more recent examples of real direct democracy which flourished during the French, Spanish and

This does not mean that Sheridan and McCombe are unaware that institutional pressures determine policies. As can be seen from their discussion on social democratic parties being some of “the most rabidly Thatcherite governments,” when they note the “powerful forces shaping these” parties into right-wing ones. (p. 119 and p. 115) Why the SSP will be immune to these “changes in the global capitalist economy” is not explained. Perhaps it is simply because, well, it has the right ideas?

The fate of social democracy, incidentally, proved Bakunin was right on the issue of electioneering. He predicted that the use of electioneering would water down socialist policies and turn parties reformist. It was for this reason he urged direct action based on workers’ self-organisation. So when *Imagine* states that “electing dedicated socialist politicians ... is an important part of the battle to change society. It is not enough” (p. 154) anarchists argue that such tactics have a proven record of de-radicalising the parties involved. Moreover, they also undermine constructive activity in our workplaces and communities and the building organs of working class power which can create a dual power to that of the state and capital.

Perhaps this focus on the ballot box explains the poverty of *Imagine*’s vision of socialism? Isolated individuals putting crosses in a bit of paper do not create new class organisations by which they can manage society. Constructive socialist activity and organising can only exist, by definition, outside the ballot box. By focusing on the ballot box, the idea that socialism can only be created from below, based on the organisations working class people create in their struggle against capitalism is missing. Rather than community assemblies, we get revamped “community councils.” Rather than workers’ self-management, we get workers’ control. Rather than working class power, we get a socialist government.

the goal of revolution. However in practice the distinction between the contenders remained largely a subjective one, a difference of ideas in the evaluation of reality rather than a difference in the realm of action. Rosa Luxemburg (one of the fiercest critics of revisionism) acknowledged in **Reform or Revolution** that it was “*the final goal of socialism [that] constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the social democratic movement from bourgeois democracy and bourgeois radicalism.*” As such, the Marxist critics of “revisionism” failed to place the growth in revisionist ideas in the tactics being used, instead seeing it in terms of a problem in ideas. By the start of the First World War, the Social Democrats had become so corrupted by its activities in bourgeois institutions it supported its state (and ruling class) and voted for war credits rather than denounce the war as Imperialist slaughter for profits. After the war, the Social Democrats crushed the German revolution, organising the far right “free corps” who not only murdered Luxemburg but also laid the basis of the Nazi movement.

Given that *Imagine* fails to learn from this sorry tale, it comes as not surprise that it does not present any coherent explanation of why Labourism failed. This is understandable, as chronicling the watering down of radical politics by electioneering would undermine their own strategy. As such, we are informed that “*although Labour was a socialist party in words, it was, in practice a social democratic party*” (and not even that as they “*were not even genuine social democrats*” as they tolerated the House of Lords and other feudal institutions). Does this mean that the *ideas* of Labour were the problem? The message seems to be one of simply creating a new party with radical ideas and we can achieve socialism by the same methods of electioneering. Needless to say, there is no mention of the degeneration of the German Green Party into reformism in the 1980s after its success at the ballot box thrust it into mainstream politics.

other revolutions. The locus of power rests in popular assemblies, in other words, not in totting up the votes of individuals separated from each other. Referenda are utterly compatible with minority rule (i.e. representative government and capitalism) as can be seen from numerous capitalist countries. It should not be confused with self-management, the people organised into assemblies to discuss and debate their own affairs directly. While minority rule can happily co-exist with referenda, it cannot do so with popular assemblies. This is why anarchism roots itself in such organs of self-management.

## Socialism?

So *Imagine* falls well short of a truly socialist political scheme (i.e. a federated, self-managed commune republic). Sadly, its economic vision also falls well short of socialism. There would be a mixed economy based on state and municipally owned workplaces, co-operatives (encouraged by cheap loans and other incentives), plus “private” sections. These private sections would compass two extremes.

The first would be small businesses employing “*less than ten people.*” We are informed these would “*thrive*” under “socialism” because they would “*be competing with each other on a level playing field.*” So, according to *Imagine*, workers in 93.7% of Scottish businesses will still be wage slaves in a “socialist” Scotland. (p. 191)

So what of the 6.3% of businesses which are left? Well, “*some larger companies ... may even remain in private hands on the grounds of expediency.*” These may include call centres and “*branch assembly plants*” which “*are individual links in an international production chain.*” We would not have to fear multinationals fleeing Scotland in fear of the “socialist” government as “*most companies would probably still find it profitable to remain*” (p. 192) This would apply to “media moguls” as well,

who would still exist in “a socialist society,” just as other capitalists would: *“In any case, a socialist government would stand up to the media moguls and ensure that the future battle of ideas will be fought out on a level battleground.”* (p. 169)

Thus *Imagine*’s Scottish “socialist” republic would have a predominantly capitalist economy, one in which over 93.7% of business would employ wage slaves and make a profit on the market. Whatever happened to the idea that socialism involves the abolition the wages system and wage labour?

What about the few firms deemed worthy of socialist transformation? Large-scale industry *“could be owned by the people of Scotland as a whole and run by democratically elected boards in which workers, consumers, and the wider socialist government were all represented.”* (pp. 190–1) While Sheridan and McCombs are for workplaces which *“could be democratically run, with elected workers’ councils”* this vision is, on closer inspection, not self-management. Rather the council would *“ratify key decisions”* made elsewhere, in the hands of *“executives and managers fully accountable to those they serve.”* There would be *“industry-wide councils”* which would *“formulate, in conjunction with the elected government and consumer groups a more general plan for industry as a whole.”*(p. 170) So whom would the manager serve? The workforce or the plan (i.e. the government “groups”)?

If all this looks familiar it is because it has similarities to Lenin’s vision of “workers’ control” during the Russian revolution. Dismissing the idea that workers could run industry themselves, he argued that they could “control” those who did (initially the capitalists). The workers’ factory committees would be integrated into a system of state control (the basic structure of which would be inherited from capitalism). Thus the workers would elect someone who would then try and “control” (i.e. ratify the decisions of) those with real power in production. Rather than directly manage production, workers were at the bottom of a structure of state control within which

## Getting there

So far, we have discussed the limitations of *Imagine*’s vision of the future. We now turn to a more pressing question, namely how will the change be achieved? It states that *“our programme will sooner or later sweep all before it at the ballot box”* and imagine that *“the forces of democratic socialism have swept to power in a general election, perhaps within an independent Scotland”* in 2010 or 2015. (p. 146)

Clearly, the politics of *Imagine* are simply a modern restatement of social democracy, the idea that socialism will come about via voting socialists at elections. Sheridan and McCombs are urging us to “imagine” a new version of social democracy rather than any real form of revolutionary socialism. The history of the past 100 odd years is ignored, with no attempt to explain the degeneration of the previous parties which have tried this path. Lenin’s revision of Marxism in an anarchist direction (namely the simple fact that socialism cannot be achieved using Parliament) is likewise ignored.

Perhaps this explains why they redefine the meaning of social democracy? We are told it *“was in essence a more restrained and civilised version of the capitalist free market”* and it aimed *“to reform capitalism.”* (p. 116) Of course they fail to mention that *originally* social democracy was no such thing. In fact it was a socialist party aiming, like the SSP, to use “political action” to win the class war and institute socialism. Given the abject failure of this strategy, we can understand the desire to distance their ideas from it. So what can the fate of social democracy tell us?

Influenced by Marx and Engels, social democracy was wracked by the “revisionism” debate after the latter’s death in 1895. The debate reflected the changes which were occurring in the party as its success at the ballot box grew. The revisionists wanted to modify the rhetoric of the party to bring it into line with its reformist practice while the Marxists stressed

## Russia and Spain

*Imagine* is right to say that there have been “*tantalising glimpses of socialist democracy in action*,” yet they fail to mention that these “*glimpses*” were inspired by anarchism rather than Marxism (p. 172). The Spanish Revolution is raised, as is May 1968 in France. Significantly, Russia is not. Perhaps this is because the Bolsheviks systematically undermined the popular workplace and community self-management the authors praise Spain and France for?

In Spain, workers placed their workplaces under self-management. As noted above, Sheridan and McCombe cannot “*imagine*” a real socialist system, one based on real workers’ self-management in spite of their praise for the “*socialist democracy*” introduced by the CNT during the Spanish Revolution (not that the CNT and its anarchism is mentioned). Yes, in Catalonia industry was run “*through mass meetings and democratically elected committees*” but this is not the system advocated by Sheridan and McCombes! (p. 172) Rather than committees “*ratifying*” decisions made elsewhere, the assemblies of workers made all the important decisions which the committees then implemented. The assemblies “*ratified*” day to day decisions of the committees. The difference between this (self-management) and *Imagine*’s scheme (workers’ control over the bosses) is obvious.

Needless to say, they fail to mention that Lenin and Trotsky explicitly opposed self-management in Russia in favour of one-man management armed with “*dictatorial*” powers. Similarly, they, like the Bolsheviks, promise to “*reconstruct new defence forces, which would be democratic, egalitarian, and accountable.*” (p. 149) While Trotskyists like to praise the CNT’s militias for this, few mention that it was Trotsky who abolished such a regime in the Red Army in March 1918. As such, the use of Spain should not surprise.

their factory committees played a minor role. Lenin had no qualms about calling his vision “*state capitalism*,” incidentally. So while *Imagine* argues that “*without democratic ownership ... there can be no real democratic control*,” (p. 84) in fact, it is the other way round. Without self-management there can be no social ownership.

While the consumer groups make sense, the role of government “*groups*” in their system suggests a more “*top down*” system than the “*grassroots upwards*” one promised. The parallels to Lenin’s state capitalism do not end there. Like Lenin, Sheridan and McCombs also call for a socialist Central Bank, although they do not claim, as he did, this was “*nine-tenths of the socialist apparatus*.” Somewhat ironically, coming from Marxists, they inject a dash of Proudhon by arguing that this bank would ensure low-interest loans to start up co-operatives. (pp. 194–5)

However, times have changed. Leninist praise for the large-scale production and organisation of monopoly capitalism is missing, thankfully. Rather, we have the anarchist opposition to capitalist monotony. The “*sameness*” and bland nature of modern capitalism is rightly condemned and rejected. The anarchist emphasis of appropriate levels of technology and scale are implied, as is decentralisation of production. As such, this is a step forward.

They also correctly point out that efficiency under capitalism is measured by profit and share value, with economics judging “*whether a national economy is ‘efficient’ or ‘inefficient’ by totting up crude figures measuring economic growth.*” As the argue, “*these statistics never tell us what’s being produced, why it’s being produced, how it’s being produced, or whether it benefits or damages society.*” (p. 108) However, given that the bulk of their “*socialist*” economy will be capitalist, it follows that a key role of their “*socialist*” government will be to intervene into the economy to counteract such tendencies. An impossible task.

## Stalinism

Sadly they weaken their arguments by their praise for Stalinism. They argue that “*as a result of the abolition of capitalism, the Soviet Union achieved spectacular social and economic advances.*” They point to the huge increase in “*Soviet industrial output*” and its high growth rates in the 1950s, 1960s and even the 1970s. While they point to the social and environment costs of this regime, they obviously forgot their earlier critique of “*totting up crude figures*” and that statistics hide whether society is being damaged or not. That the high growth rates they praise were the product of a regime based on a “*ruling bureaucracy*” which “*displayed an unhealthy obsession with stark statistics*” and “*strangled initiative and stifled individual flair*” is ignored. (pp. 134–4)

A regime which stopped at nothing to accumulate capital would have substantial growth rates, but this is not worthy of praise! Equally, this glorification of Stalinist economic growth, while understandable due to their Trotskyist past, raises significant questions. If centralised planning can so “effective” then why does *Imagine* reject it in favour of decentralised planning in its future socialist society? If the decentralised planning they seem to advocate does not lead to high levels of growth, will it be rejected in favour of techniques which can develop “productive forces”? Unsurprisingly, they point the reader to Trotsky’s “*Revolution Betrayed*” to explain Stalinism (calling this superficial, confused book a “*seminal analysis of totalitarianism in the Soviet Union*”). Thus the Janus like nature of their book springs forth. The libertarian influenced critique of the present is squeezed into their Trotskyist background and foundations of their politics.

Needless to say, their idea that capitalism was abolished in Russia has its ramifications in their vision of “socialism.” As noted above, *Imagine* sees socialism existing while there is wage labour.

## In the dark

They quote Tony Benn on how Trotsky was “*the Soviet Union’s first dissident.*” Surely they **must** know that the first “dissidents” in the Soviet Union were the anarchists, the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries imprisoned and shot by Trotsky and Lenin’s political police from early 1918 onward? Equally, while they state that most journalists have “*no understanding of who Leon Trotsky actually was, or what he stood for,*” Sheridan and McCombs make no comment on his support, when in power, for policies which were identical to those which many socialists condemn as Stalinist. Indeed, they assert that Trotsky “*defended*” socialist democracy while, in fact, he consistently advocated party dictatorship. Therefore, the historical tradition *Imagine* places itself is hardly the bastion of socialist democracy they would like to claim it is. Significantly, they stress that “*for socialists, democracy is not an optional extra ... Socialism without free elections, without free trade unions, without free speech, is not socialism.*” (p. 131) If so, Trotsky’s politics were not socialist.

So while condemning Stalinism, they remain strangely silent about Lenin and Trotsky’s authoritarian policies, leaving their comments on the matter to a bland and vague appeal to “*the early days*” of the Russian Revolution when it aimed at “*co-operation, equality and democracy.*” (p. 133) The failure of the revolution is blamed on isolation and its “*backward*” nature, with no mention of Bolshevik policies and their role in its degeneration. (p. 134). Ironically, they note that “*only when people are kept in the dark can they be controlled.*” (p. 75) Sadly they fail to shed even the feeblest light on the defining event of their political tradition. As such, when they say Trotsky’s *Revolution Betrayed* “*remains to this day the most powerful and plausible explanation of what went wrong in the Soviet Union*” (p. 139) I suspect that Marx may be proved right and history will repeat itself, this time as farce rather than tragedy.