

# The working class and capitalist democracy

By Mark Osborn

pret what they see?), it is a film at desperate pains to remind you it is fiction, not documentary.

But to pose the discussion, as pretty well all these writers do, only in the broadest terms (film does/doesn't cause violence), is far too abstract. The anti-violence lobby lumps together the 'violence' of the crappiest straight-to-video action movie with the 'violence' of serious films, and ignores non-explicit, but often more romanticised, violence altogether. Martin Scorsese cannot be discussed in the same breath as a Kung Fu flick, and it's not just snobbery to insist on this. The violence of *Rambo* is surely as obnoxious for its ideological content as its graphic depiction.

The claim, made repeatedly in this anthology by 'defenders' of violence, that film has no effect at all on its audiences, is plainly absurd, and the Michael Medveds don't take long to make mincemeat of it. What effect films have is harder to say. Many of us who are not psychopaths enjoy some extremely violent films. I'm sure I'm not alone in finding the incessant suggestion that I am therefore a sicko a bit irritating.

This is not a matter of pointing out the obvious, that people who commit copycat murders after watching an overblown and tedious Oliver Stone movie had a problem before they saw it. It is a matter of recognising that fantasy and entertainment are more complex than Medved et al suppose, and of being able to recognise where violence is 'cheap', mere spectacle, and where it is dramatically valid. It isn't only in arthouse movies that violence can be valid; it can be dramatically valid in a trashy action movie. To dispute that violence, including explicit SFX violence, can be valid is to condemn most dramatic art since, at least, Shakespeare.

So we need criteria by which to assess artistically what we see. *Screen Violence* doesn't really provide any.

A good read, but rarely very profound.

Clive Bradley

*Screen Violence*, ed. Carl French, Bloomsbury, £9.99

**M**AJOR and Blair describe Britain as a "democracy". It would be more accurate to say that Britain is a *bourgeois* democracy — a society where all the fundamental decisions are made by and in the interests of the capitalist class.

It is perfectly true that there is more freedom here than in Stalin's Russia or in Nazi Germany. Even limited rights should be defended.

Nevertheless, how "free" are we? How much control and power does the working class actually have in this society?

Consider life at work. There is virtually no democracy for workers. No one elects their boss. No one votes on how much their managers get paid. The rule at work is more or less: do this, do that... or you have the democratic right to leave.

The only constraints on the dictatorship of the capitalists in the workplace are those which the unions have managed to impose.

What about political life?

## 1. A "level playing field"?

There are certain democratic rights which we all possess in Britain today. However these rights are more real for some than for others. For example, we all have the right to free speech. However Rupert Murdoch can make more of this right because he owns a number of newspapers and Sky TV!

The right to strike has been eaten away by laws enforced by the judiciary — a well-paid elite — and by the police.

The French writer, Anatole France, summed up the situation: the laws forbids both millionaires and beggars to sleep under the bridges. The point, of course, is that millionaires never need to sleep under bridges.

And millionaires never need to strike. And millionaires can always buy their free speech.

In a world where some people have vast wealth and others have nothing, laws and democratic rights will give us only formal equality.

## 2. "We decide how the country is run".

It is true we have a vote in general and local elections. This right is impor-

tant and it took over a century of struggle to win it (ending in 1928 with full adult suffrage for women). But how much control does the vote give us over how the country is run? Not too much.

We have a vote in general elections once every five years or so. We have no right to mandate or recall our MP. And our parliament is often a very poor reflection of what British people really want — or the poll tax and NHS cuts would never have been allowed.

The "first past the post" voting system means that millions of votes do not count (Labour votes in Cornwall, Tory votes in Scotland, socialist votes in most places).

Moreover parliament is hemmed in by all sorts of undemocratic, unaccountable institutions — the monarchy and House of Lords, for example.

Socialists support fixed-term, annual parliaments (an old, as yet unfulfilled demand of the Chartists), and proportional representation in elections (so that parties receive seats in strict proportion to the number of votes they poll). We want the monarchy and House of Lords abolished.

However, *many* countries have no monarchy; some also have forms of proportional representation. There are further barriers which cut against working-class people really running the society in which they are the majority.

Many factors prevent most working-class people fully involving themselves in politics, in an informed way, under capitalism.

The circulation of information and the production of ideas in this society is dominated by the capitalists.

And the reality of life in capitalist society is also a serious handicap. Being utterly tired at the end of a long day, lacking money, lacking adequate schooling — all are barriers to full involvement in politics.

Unelected structures of rule aim to put the most basic decisions in the hands of the capitalist class: private ownership of industry (already discussed) and, behind parliament, a huge, largely unaccountable state machine.