

NOTES

History Workshop Conference

Judy Bloomfield writes: In the outwardly inappropriate surroundings of a derelict church, over 600 socialist historians, both lay and professional, gathered for the plenary session of the Ruskin History Workshop — on E P Thompson's latest book *The Poverty of Theory*. The themes of the debate derived from Thompson's attack on French Communist philosopher, Louis Althusser (him again!) and his English followers, and his trenchant defence both of socialist humanism and English materialist historiography.

Stuart Hall opened the debate with his own criticisms of 'Althusserianism'

(1) Its confusion between empiricism and the empirical — the difference between assuming facts to be independent, objective and self-explanatory and the investigation of the concrete (through case studies or historical moments) which may then be subjected to more abstract analysis.

(2) The confusion of theory with practice by the semantic device of labelling theory 'theoretical practice', rather than recognising the necessity of theory *and* its living link with political practice.

(3) The over-emphasis on the determining power of structures, rather than class struggle, in historical change. This so-called 'structural causality' deprives the working class and the people of the power to intervene effectively in history, to challenge the system.

His major criticisms however were reserved for Thompson. The first problem he raised was the limitation of the 'polemical mode' - ie, caricaturing an argument to discredit it or conflating it with a political position which evokes a hostile response (eg, Stalinist). Further question marks were posed over Thompson's concept of experience — its relationship to real relations and analytical categories (eg, economy, class

structure) and over the relationship between theory and practice — whether there was a simple relationship of proof of the one in the other. Finally, Stuart Hall argued against a notion of the 'people' or 'people's history' as preexistent, rather than 'the people' as a political identity (and popular unity for socialism) having to be constructed in struggle, through political alliances and the cohesion of diverse progressive ideological traditions.

Richard Johnson, from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, argued against 'theoretical absolutism' — the false polarisation of positions which shared a great deal and the hostile tone of debate. His main disagreement with Thompson centred on a 'culturalist' bias in Thompson's work, the focus on the culture of adversity, the forms of resistance as an expression of some 'essential' humanity rather than on the totality of relations and structures of exploitation and oppression and the culture of resistance (in both its strengths and limitations).

Thompson's reply began with a self-styled 'series of refusals'. The label of culturalism pinned on him by Richard Johnson was rejected — and he pointed to his own criticism of Raymond Williams' early work for neglecting the interaction of culture with institutions and structures. He asserted that the prime motivation for the new interest in the late 1950s and 1960s in culture, class and experience was a political one and decried Johnson's lack of awareness of the political context both then, and now in his attack on Althusserianism as a new form of Stalinism, involving political expulsions (from the PCF) and attacks on libertarian Marxism. He refuted criticisms of his vitriolic manner by attributing academic timidity and politeness to his critics, while claiming his legitimacy from the cut and thrust of political battle. The audience was left to draw its own conclusions as to which political tradition justified political abuse of one's opponents within the movement.

Finally, Thompson accepted the use of the concept of structure for exploratory purposes and of theory as a complement to historical work but rejected both as self-contained systems (as does Althusser). He defined determination as setting limits to, or putting pressure on — and proposed experience as a 'junction concept' between 'social being' and 'social consciousness'. Experience (1) which was the result of social being was lived experience (assumed to be non-ideological) and experience (2) was perceived experience in the sphere of social consciousness. As Stuart Hall pointed out in his final reply using the term experience to cover both concepts was not only confusing but evaded the central

problem of the passage from one to the other, from class-in-itself to class-for-itself, from the lived acceptance of the existing order to its socialist transformation.

It would be easy to dismiss the debate because of Thompson's demonology, and the theological pretensions of its setting and style. But the issues behind the showmanship are both serious and relevant to the making of socialism and the retrieval of a past. They deserve the attention of the whole socialist and popular movement and in a manner which allows for full participation.

EURORED II

Delay in the publication of *Eurored II* gave rise to reports of the journal's demise. These reports were exaggerated. *Eurored* has now been around for over 3 years, first appearing at a time of growing interest in and study of West European developments. It was also, but coincidentally, the time when the term Eurocommunism started to be current. Likewise, the Left seemed on the eve of advances that would transform the political balances in some important countries: the Union of the Left in France between the Communists (PCF), the revamped Socialists led by Francois Mitterand, and the Left Radicals; the big gains made by the Italian Communists and the prospect of Communist participation in Government (to say nothing of the reaction of conservatives of various types to this prospect); developments in Spain after the end of Franco; Portugal and the 1974 revolution.

Eurored has tried to reflect these developments, by publishing in the main the views of Communist Parties in Western Europe, or leading members of those parties — to let the Parties speak for themselves as it were. Thus we printed the important statement of the Belgian Party on internationalism (No 6). On the controversial subject of the EEC, it is probably only in *Eurored* (Nos 8, 9, and 10) that you could find the Communist Parties concerned 'speaking for themselves'.

And so to No 11 (price 50p) the implicit theme of which would seem to be, once again, attitudes to Socialist Parties: the Communist Parties featured are from Portugal, West Germany, France and Sweden.

The Editorial Board is currently taking stock of *Eurored* both in relation to content and circulation and finance. Views of readers would be much appreciated and should be sent (as should donations and requests for back issues) to *Eurored*, c/o 16 King Street, London WC2.

Contributions to *Notes* (brief please) are welcome. We need copy before the 1st of the month preceding publication.

