

# REVIEWS

## *Retreating from reality*

### **Class Politics: An Answer to its Critics**

Ben Fine, Laurence Harris, Marjorie Mayo,  
Angela Weir, Elizabeth Wilson, £1.50

Since 1979 the Left in Britain has suffered a number of serious setbacks. The amazing resilience of the men and women of the coalfields is evidence of our capacity to sustain an alternative vision within the depths of economic recession, and despite Thatcher's political onslaught. Even now, however, the response at all levels of our movement is much weaker than is required to match the careful preparation and determination of the Tories. One of the strengths of Marxism is its capacity to confront reality and ask why events have occurred. However there is little agreement on the difficulties facing the Left, or the strategies we should adopt. The reason for these differences and for the increasing sharpness with which they are being expressed rests within the history of the Left generally, and more specifically for our purposes here, of the British Marxist tradition.

From the late 20s until the end of the 50s the terms of the debate between British Marxists were largely determined by the split between Stalin and Trotsky, although there was much common ground. But, particularly after 1956 and the revelations of Stalin's abuse of power, the Communist Party gradually began an examination of the relationship between socialism and democracy.

Particularly important theoretically has been the work of the Italian Marxist Gramsci. The Gramscian view of bourgeois society is that it is a system of domination through hegemony, that is consent won through ideological struggle in every aspect of civil society. It follows that the struggle of the working class for socialism cannot be confined to the capturing of state power. The working class has also to build hegemony in civil society, crucial to which is the construction of alliances with social movements representing forces within and outside the working class. By such means, the working class needs to elaborate around itself a popular, democratic majority.

Within this framework the working class clearly remains, because of the pivotal role of class in our society, the *only* force capable of bringing about socialism. Its fulfillment of that role, however, is not inevitable. It depends on the capacity of

the working class to be conscious of its role and to engage in a political and ideological struggle for national leadership. To this end, the labour movement must engage on a terrain wider than class, and be sensitive to and intervene in other contradictions in society, for example race, gender, nation.

These ideas informed the CP's strategy document *The British Road to Socialism* adopted in 1977. A strategy for building a broad democratic alliance is set out, on the basis of which could be achieved 'a Labour government of a new type' capable of implementing, in concert with this popular bloc, a democratic transformation of the state and social relations. Although this strategy contained quite new elements, in many ways it also carried forward and gave a sharper theoretical edge to the broad non-sectarian communist tradition dating, outstandingly, from the building of popular fronts against fascism in the 30s.

However, a minority within the Communist Party saw *The British Road to Socialism* as an abandonment of class politics, and as a terrible betrayal. In their view Marxism is an unchanging truth contained in the classical Marxist texts. The tablets merely needed to be handed down and applied. The role of the working class in achieving socialism is seen as predetermined and imminent because of the historic contradiction between capital and labour. Moreover, all contradictions in society are ultimately reducible to this contradiction, so that popular and democratic movements are reduced to instruments to further the class struggle. They reject the notion of an alliance between popular democratic forces and seek to replace it with the idea of an anti-monopoly alliance, based mainly on economic struggles. This minority opposition see themselves as upholding a communist tradition which they believe has been betrayed by the leadership of the Communist Party. Ironically - or not so ironically - their views remain very similar to those of the Trotskyist Left.

*Class Politics: An Answer to its Critics* attempts to use the language developed in the notion of the broad democratic alliance. But like the present editors of the *Morning Star*, who have recently published extracts from the pamphlet, they do so only in order to present a quite different kind of politics. In fact the pamphlet is the most comprehensive statement of the minority opposition in the Communist Party.

The pamphlet takes as its starting point

the assertion that 'the newer left', which they define very loosely and vaguely, but, it would appear, is mainly seen as centring on *Marxism Today*, has abandoned 'the central role of class and class conflict'. But in fact the centrality of class in their pamphlet amounts to little more than an assertion that the working class has an interest in achieving socialism. In other words, it's back to the old idea of false consciousness - the working class is not revolutionary because it's been 'misled'. Correct leadership and slogans are all that the working class awaits. Of course, given this approach and taken at that level of abstraction, the changes in the character, composition and culture of the working class in the postwar period seem irrelevant. That is why they remain unexplored by the authors.

The political strategy proposed in the pamphlet amounts to little more than a programme based on the traditional themes: a strong central state, a planned economy along Soviet lines, and a greater commitment to the Soviet Union internationally. They pay lip service, but no more, to the critique of socialist democracy developed by Communists and others, which is vital not only to understanding those societies but also to any conception of socialism in Britain. And they operate with a simplified version of society, wholly interpreted in terms of the economic class struggle.

They write, for example, 'the *only* basis for unity between black and white *must* be an analysis of racism as a class issue in which an understanding of the role of imperialism is particularly crucial' (my ital TD). Similarly we are told that, 'the mobilising potential for women is greatest, in the first instance, for the general economic issues, that are in the process of change, those concerning employment and wages. . . This claim seems quite extraordinary in the light of the diversity of women's politics.

The chapter on feminism highlights many of the pamphlet's deficiencies. It is critical of most developments in the women's movement. Astonishingly, a substantial portion of it is devoted to a critique of *mlf*, a feminist journal with a tiny academic circulation. They use this critique to assert that all socialist feminism has become 'post Marxist' feminism. They give radical feminists a pat on the back for 'insisting on an institutional critique of male power', but systematically condemn all socialist feminists who have tried to

integrate the insights of feminism into a Marxist analysis. Because they themselves cannot come to terms with an analysis that is based on anything other than a narrow, economic view of class, they assume that those that are trying to do so are engaged in a conspiracy totally to banish women from class relations. Similarly, those that are trying to construct a theoretical basis to understand the relationship between the labour movement and the women's movement, that is those who are exploring the concept of alliances within the working class movement, are caricatured as trying 'to justify the creation of a new mass electoral alliance around the Labour Party. . .'

It seems clear that because *they* cannot understand the relationship between sex and class, except in the restricted domain of the workplace, they condemn all those who are trying to explore this fruitful area.

Creating a popular feminism which can relate to and help transform the lives of women, the majority of whom who are working class, is still an urgent priority, but it is a project which is well under way. Feminism *has* already changed the lives of thousands of battered women, for example, and created a new awareness amongst women of their own worth. Not least, although some sections of the Left have attempted to characterise the Women Against Pit Closures movement as separate from feminism, it would have been inconceivable without the wider context of the women's movement including, for example, Greenham. Thousands of women in the coalfields have been able to offer the most valuable support to the NUM, and to develop their own organisations, demands and strategies, to begin to understand that feminism is not as irrelevant as it is often made out to seem by the media and by anti-feminists on the Left.

And yet the authors can seriously regret that we have not yet achieved 'any significant mobilisation of women workers such as occurred around the Equal Pay Act and to some extent around the Working Women's Charter.' They account for this by citing 'another major theme in current feminist writing, the critique of trade unions as male dominated bargaining units'. They say that this has divided feminists from working class women. No doubt all of this will come as a surprise to the many active trade union feminists who may recall the campaign to protect the 1967 Abortion Act, and who have some knowledge of campaigning to implement

the policies on issues like sexual harassment.

The authors have defined what they are looking for in such a narrow way that they are blind to many of the creative developments in the working class movement.

Because they look at the class struggle in an abstract, unhistorical way, the authors are dismissive of attempts, particularly in *Marxism Today*, to account for the specific nature of the current political crisis. They regard the notion of Thatcherism as a figment of our imagination. Since they do not accept that the Left and working class movement is engaged in a battle for people's ideas in every area of society, they are not interested in the particular set of ideas that we are contesting. Thus Thatcher is an embodiment of the class enemy, and that is all that needs to be said. They are simply not interested in understanding why the new dominating forces in the Conservative Party have been able to win popular support.

In fact, they maintain that there has been no shift to the right in the working class. It is not so much that the ideological battle has been won by Thatcher, but that we have been betrayed by Labour. Labour has 'not been willing to harness and represent the interests of the working people (which always remain the same? -TD) in industrial and economic planning, a path which would have involved an intense challenge to the power of the City and the multi-nationals.' Their assumption is that the working class is already programmed for socialism and all that is necessary is to press the correct buttons to trigger the response. The reality is far more complex.

The main evidence for their claim that the working class is in a strong and healthy state, ready to win socialism, is the increase in trade union membership in the 70s. But they don't give any consideration to the thought that this has been largely a defensive reaction. The regularisation of pay bargaining in the 70s and, more recently, fear of redundancy and concern at deterioration of conditions of service, have been significant in determining attitudes towards trade union membership. These concerns are not at all at odds with support for the individualistic values of Thatcherism. Nor do they necessarily lead to loyalty to trade unions as organisations or to an understanding of the political role of trade unions. As Peter Hain has recently pointed out (November 1984 MT), 'The Post Office Engineering Union is the only major union to affiliate to the Labour Party in

the postwar period. Recent ballots by NALGO in 1982 and the CPSA in 1983 showed majorities of 8 to 1 and 2 to 1 respectively against establishing political funds and Labour links.' A MORI opinion poll conducted for Trade Unions for a Labour Victory shows that in only three affiliated unions - the EEUPTU, the NUM and the UCW - do the majority of members want to retain the link with Labour and the payment that goes with it. None of this is inevitable. Membership of a union *does* create the conditions for a process of politicisation through formal and informal education and collective action. But this is a process of construction. It is not simply a question of 'harnessing' or 'representing' a pre-existing consciousness.

The changes that have taken place in the composition of the working class since the war, and the break-down of the economic and political basis for the traditional Keynesian programme of the Labour Party have led to a political crisis for the whole labour movement. Our failure to adapt to the new situation has seriously contributed to the popularity of Thatcherism. New ideas and initiatives are urgently needed on the Left, if we are to build a movement that is capable of challenging the new Right's ideological grip. In arguing that 'the mixture as before' is sufficient, the authors of *Class Politics* have opted out of this struggle. Indeed, they deny that such a crisis of the Left exists.

Ben Fine and his co-authors think it is pessimistic to argue the need for change. Indeed the use of phrases like 'class collaborationist' to describe those authors in *Marxism Today* and elsewhere who have called for a radical reappraisal of the Left's analysis and strategy suggests that we are to be seen as little better than the class enemy. They would do well to remember that it is a principle of Marxism that it is the masses, *not slogans*, or rhetoric, who make history. The point of revolutionary politics after all is not to hunt out heretics (or worse) on the Left, but to understand where people and society are at, and on that basis find forms of broad mass *struggle* through which more and more people can come to understand the meaning of socialism and its relevance to their own lives, to build a practice that takes account of where people are now, as well as where we would like them to be. This is a more *hopeful* starting point from which to develop mass action than the belief that the answers are only to be found in our own heads.

Tricia Davis