

# REVIEWS

Held and John Keane, in one of the most stimulating and original contributions in the book, recognise the resonance that the new Right has found with popular discontent and argue convincingly for a two-pronged strategy: democratising civil society, through the development of a multiplicity of self-determining autonomous organisations, and democratising state institutions through reforms of the political system (including proportional representation) and the civil service, and measures to promote freedom of information.

It is a pity though that the major political thrust of the book, argued most sharply in James Curran's introduction and in the chapter by Doreen Massey, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, is an unwarranted attack on Eric Hobsbawm's analysis, and what the latter call the 'Great Moving Right Male Left Show'. The attack is unwarranted not because Eric Hobsbawm's analysis and the general theoretical positions expressed in *Marxism Today* do not need discussion, but because the attacks are based on either a misunderstanding or a misrepresentation of that position.

The 'Eurocommunist' position is set up as a straw person as follows: social changes and/or left policies have eroded Labour's support among the electorate; in order to retain electoral support Labour must adapt to public opinion and shift to the right; such a shift to the right will also lay the basis for an alliance or coalition with the Alliance in order to prevent another Thatcher victory. In different ways, and for different reasons, John Westergaard, Anthony Barnett and Ben Pimlott all argue against this 'position'.

But in my view the actual position argued by the Communist Party and in *Marxism Today* is very different. It argues that the postwar consensus and the particular features of postwar social democracy have been undermined; this has happened through a combination of social change, failure by Labour governments to deal with deepening economic crisis, and growing disillusionment with the bureaucratic and paternalist welfare state; Labour has not succeeded in developing a credible alternative to the failed postwar consensus. Thus one alliance, or coalition of social forces, that which underpinned postwar social democracy, is fast disappearing. The radical Right is in the process of seeking to build a new, right oriented, historic bloc of social forces by fragmenting the opposition and hijacking

accumulated, and justified, discontent with the previous consensus. They are creating a new consensus held together by an ideology of individualism and popular authoritarianism.

In this situation what is urgently needed is a strategy for creating a new, left historic bloc of social forces which will constitute a political majority for radical, democratic politics. This would be the first stage in moving towards a democratic socialist society. This is the strategy underlying the Communist Party's concept of a broad democratic alliance.

It is sad that the excellent chapters by Gareth Stedman Jones and Stuart Hall discussing the reasons for the breakdown of the postwar historic bloc, and the conditions necessary for the creation of a new one should be regarded, in the book's own terms, as pessimistic because they face reality. Some other contributors, although explicitly critical of aspects of the 'Eurocommunist' position, nevertheless provide interesting analyses which seem to me to be either broadly consistent with it, or to raise important problems within it.

In particular, Raymond Williams argues against any form of coalition, whether within the Labour Party or between it and any other parties, on the grounds that any form of coalition would prevent the necessary work of discovering the contemporary argument for socialism. Williams argues that working to clarify the vision of socialism relevant for today cannot be combined with seeking to create an alliance for the next stage in the process. Although not convinced that this would be impossible, I was persuaded that discussion is urgently needed on what would be the nature of the positive common theme or programme of any anti-Thatcher alliance.

Tony Benn argues that Labour's defeat was due to the Parliamentary Labour Party becoming separated from the Labour Party outside parliament; and to conceding basic arguments on policy, and adopting revisionist, non-socialist policies. He recognises the importance of groups outside the traditional labour movement, and the need to build alliances with them, but he sees this as occurring either through direct affiliation to the Labour Party or through joint campaigns that would help Labour to represent the majority of people. What is missing is the recognition that Thatcherism represents something new, with a popular resonance (still); or that the Left requires a strategy for the creation of a new historic bloc which must be based on the

## Misunderstanding or Misrepresentation ?

The Future of the Left  
James Curran (ed) Polity Press £4.95



This book is a set of articles from *New Socialist*, mostly somewhat revised, with three hitherto unpublished.

Although of variable quality and originality, and in no sense comprehensive, the policy chapters are interesting and reflect the extent to which new thinking is occurring within some sections of the Labour Left. Perhaps they also reflect growing recognition of the need for policies that can be supported by socialists and yet are realistic. Neil Kinnock argues that socialism and freedom are inseparable, and that democracy is essential for both. David

complete independence and self-determination of autonomous social movements; and that the process of constructing such an alliance necessarily involves interaction in which all participants learn from each other and change.

Most chapters in this collection reflect new thinking and new experiences that contribute constructively to the debate on the future of the Left, not least the discussion by Doreen Massey *et al* of new initiatives by left local authorities with local trade unionists and community groups. Yet the editorial theme and the framework of much of the book are centred on a rather bad tempered attack on the 'pessimistic' 'Labour should move to the right' straw person attributed to *Marxism Today* and the 'Eurocommunists'. Perhaps the fact that, although the book is titled *The Future of the Left*, the Left is effectively identified as the Labour Party may be part of the explanation.

**Pat Devine**