

The History Men

The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis

Harvey J Kaye, *Polity Press*, £6.95

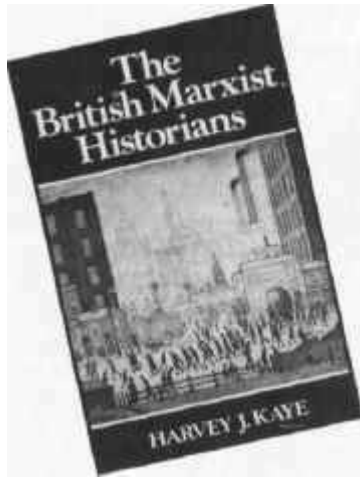
Visions of History

MAHRO, *Manchester University Press*, £19.50

As a political tradition and as an analytical method, Marxism is about explaining and promoting historical change. And the achievement of the British Marxist historians has today become a significant landmark in both Marxist thought and in wider intellectual culture.

After 1945 there was a renaissance of Marxist historiography in Britain. An important focus of discussion and research was in and around the Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-56. The group first met to discuss and extend the work of A L Morton, whose popularly written *People's History of England* appeared in 1938. Another key influence was the historical arguments of the rather isolated Cambridge communist economist, Maurice Dobb. The group came to embrace a very large number of committed historians, whether specialist or non-specialist, university-based or 'lay'. It

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embarked on ambitious collaborative projects, attempting to rework the entire history of British capitalism and of exploited classes. In terms of approach and method, it sought to unite under the banner of Marxism a popular understanding of the past and a serious engagement with non-Marxist scholarship.

In the crisis of 1956 and after, some of the group's members were to mount a central political critique of communist orthodoxy. The question of Stalinism posed direct questions of historical truth and objectivity, and the historians seemed to have felt particularly responsible for raising and resolving them. Many left the CP during this period. Subsequently, several of them became distinguished academics; but few have turned their backs on either the labour movement or the Marxist tradition. Their work is still characterised by the aspiration to develop a creative and well founded practice of historical materialism.

Harvey Kaye's book provides an introduction to the best known figures - Maurice Dobb, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson. Each is treated in terms of the development of his work, and his more general contribution to Marxist theory and politics.

This approach results in several accurate generalisations about the individuals and about the group as a whole. Thus Rodney Hilton's writings on the structure and dynamics of feudalism - perhaps the most consistently focused work of them all - are considered in some detail for the first time in this sort of format. His longstanding insistence that the English peasantry was an active, combative class is singled out for praise. Hill's work on the intellectual origins and social significance of the English Revolution is extensive and pioneering. He has written about the class struc-

ture of the 'bourgeois revolution' of 1640; about the rich political ideas of lower class groups such as the Diggers and Levellers; and about the relation between the social revolution and English culture (eg, Milton, Marvell).

Hobsbawm's range is also prodigious: the general European crisis in the transition to capitalism; the ages of revolution and capital in the nineteenth century; social banditry and peasant revolt; the British labour movement; and jazz. Kaye rightly highlights Hobsbawm's clarity and his sense of the totality of historical development as his main strengths. Finally, Edward Thompson's pathbreaking accounts of the formation of the English working class, and his explorations into the cultural forms of solidarity and resistance amongst eighteenth-century 'plebeian' classes is rehearsed. Thompson's inimitable political rhetoric is illustrated, and Kaye endorses Thompson's reformulations of the definition of social class (seeing it more in terms of historical context and community consciousness than in those of 'objective' economic categories about ownership of the means of production).

It is to be hoped, then, that Kaye's book will lead readers on to the historians themselves. However, *The British Marxist Historians* is badly flawed, in that Kaye's own contentious version of Marxism is imposed on the group collectively as if it were their own. He denies that a Marxist historical analysis can benefit from the metaphor of a primary economic base upon which rises a secondary political and cultural superstructure. And he argues that class analysis of a provisional kind using theoretical abstractions is of little use. Instead, he proposes that a perspective of 'class struggle' analysis - in which base and superstructure, culture and class become seamlessly fused together - is the proper Marxist approach; and one, moreover, which the 'British Marxist historians' openly advocate.

These claims are highly misleading, and Kaye's general theoretical standpoint (influenced especially by Edward Thompson) is only weakly and sketchily defended. Whatever the faults of 'base and superstructure' and 'class analysis', something very like them are indispensable as *provisional* concepts of historical materialism. Further, even a cursory reading of the main books of these historians (especially the earlier ones) shows the considerable presence of those Marxist guidelines. But

in general, the extent to which the historians' contributions remained consistent over time, and were informed by a coherent, explicit theoretical framework of the kind Kaye suggests, is seriously exaggerated.

Reflection on these weaknesses in Kaye's argument nevertheless prompts further questions. For if his picture doesn't quite fit this group of historians, it does represent a growing feeling amongst radical historians that 'classical' Marxism, with its allegedly narrow focus on class and economy, can form only one angle in a wider critical perspective on history. Today, there is the sense that issues of gender, race, community, culture, and power in history cannot be fully accounted for in historical materialism. Thus in history as in politics, the relation between Marxism and other critical modes is simultaneously one of alliance and tension.

Visions of History conveys something of this dilemma. It is a series of interviews with well known radical historians, including Thompson and Hobsbawm, conducted from 1976-83 by the American radical historians' organisation. The overall impression is of a range of historians whose scholarly work is heavily but variously influenced by their political commitment, and whose relation to Marxism is ambivalent.

Thus Sheila Rowbotham's histories reveal an allegiance to feminism, drawing on the Utopian rather than 'scientific' strand of British socialism. Linda Gordon comments that in order to think historically at all, it is necessary to read Marx, but that the beginnings of an adequate history of women and the family have come from the women's movement, not the Marxist Left. And Natalie Z Davis argues from an anthropological viewpoint that historical societies and cultural change cannot be understood as phases of a pattern of social evolution - the latter concept being an aspect of Marxist thought, in her view. Similar points from other radical positions are presented by other interviewees.

Each of the critical points mentioned are, I think, contestable in terms of a broad-based historical materialism. But the once familiar claim that Marxism provides the only scientific approach to history, for all the efforts of the British Marxist historians, looks increasingly difficult to sustain. Time will tell. Meanwhile, the spread and quality of a variety of radical histories is not a bad thing.

Gregor McLennan