

## BEN FINE Class politics



In her review (*MT* Jan 1985) of the pamphlet *Class politics: an answer to its critics*, Tricia Davis recognises that 'one of the strengths of Marxism is its capacity to confront reality and ask why events have occurred'. What she seems unable to accept is that the same events can be open to interpretation and to have implications for political assessment other than her own. For this reason, her review is heavy with empty insults and total distortion to the extent that it is questionable whether she has done more than glance at the object of her review.

The pamphlet clearly contains an analysis of the changing class composition of Britain and its importance for strategy from a class perspective. But this is persistently denied by Tricia Davis. As a result, she puts forward a dogma of the purest kind: she not only does not *allow* other views, she does not even recognise that they *exist!*

In a mere two pages, she manages to make so many of the Left's clichéd criticisms that she borders on self-parody. We're charged with the crimes of ahistoricism, dogmatism, determinism, fundamentalism, instrumentalism, economism, idealism and reductionism. (Trotskyism is also thrown in for good measure.) None of these criticisms is substantiated by a single textual reference.

Such are the charges, the trial is short and the sentence follows an extended homily on the evolution of and justification for the *British Road to Socialism*. Tricia Davis concludes: '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.'

We might regret the absence of imperialism here (and its bearing on race, gender, nation and class, but this is all too familiar a feature of the British Left as our pamphlet notes). But compare the above with our own view that: 'The concept of the broad democratic alliance, a potentially mass force in which progressive movements are brought into a dialectical relationship with the working class and its organisations provides, we believe, the most crucial strategy for left advance in Britain today.' (p 63.)

Not much to differ on here apparently, so readers are warned that we 'use the language. . . of the broad democratic alliance. . . only in order to present a quite different kind of politics.' There is no escape. Where something is written which might even be accepted, it is simply set aside under the additional charge of deceit.

The charges, the homily and, finally, the sentence. We are identified with 'a (emphasis added) minority within the Communist Party (who) saw the *British Road to Socialism* as an abandonment of class politics.' By the next paragraph, this opposition (as we all know, associated with those who did or did not break away to form the New Communist Party) has become '*the* (emphasis added) minority opposition in the Communist Party' associated with the present editors of the *Morning Star*.

So the sentence is to be labelled as a contemporary faction (although the word is never used) in order to be associated with a faction of the past, even though everybody knows that these two 'factions' are opposed to each other. This is history through the looking glass.

Tricia Davis devotes the majority of her textual criticism to the women's issue. She quotes selectively to imply that we are out of touch with developments. She extracts our view of the absence of 'any significant mobilisation of women workers such as occurred around the Equal Pay Act and to some extent around the Working Women's Charter'. She comments that '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.'

Yet the quote from our pamphlet is within a section headed 'Women and the Alternative Economic Strategy', and it is immediately preceded by: 'Since the Working Women's Charter, there have been few feminist campaigns, *although at*

*national level feminists have won important policies - on sexual harassment at work and parity of part-time workers, for example'* (emphasis added). But Tricia Davis writes as if we have taken no account of such developments by quoting from the very next sentences.

This is not the only misrepresentation of our views. She suggests 'the changes in the character, composition and culture of the working class in the postwar period seem irrelevant'. Yet we analyse this changing composition's effects on trade unionism in some detail, for example.

For Tricia Davis, we are 'simply not interested in understanding why the dominating forces in the Conservative Party have been able to win popular support'. Yet, apart from much else besides, we have a section entitled 'Electoralism' and the 'Swing to the Right'. At a deeper level, we analyse the peculiarities of Britain's economic weaknesses and the failure of the labour movement's response.

We are charged that we neglect 'new ideas and initiatives (that) are urgently needed on the Left. . . Indeed, they deny that such a crisis of the Left exists.' Yet, in our closing sentence, 'we welcome and believe we can build on the issues raised by the newer left.' And there can surely be little doubt of our belief in the crisis of the Left, certainly of its intellectuals. Nor can we be alone in this, for our pamphlet, despite its academic language, has called forth a response not only from the *Morning Star*, but also from the *New Statesman*, the *Guardian* and even from Channel 4 News. Tricia Davis's response in *Marxism Today* is a rather different and unfortunate index of that crisis, based as it is on name-calling, accusations of factionalism and distortion.