



**Clashing Values**

The Ideology of the New Right  
Ruth Levitas (ed) Polity Press £6.95

Here is a morality tale. Once a lovely young woman who believed in very Victorian values like the Conservative party, true love and honesty, fell in love with a handsome man who, equally Victorian, practised private vice and public virtue. But the consequences of sinful sex were a baby (enter father denouncing the cad) and scandal (enter silent wife standing for the permanence of marriage and the family). As these values were revealed to have quite different meanings for each person, the Tory prime minister was revealed to have regarded all possibilities from illicit affairs through divorce to abortion with the same equanimity as long as none of them interfered with the authority of government.

The point of this story is not that anything you want to believe can be upheld as a Victorian value (though it can); but that right-wing ideology can never move very far from its residual base of defending the past or existing order. As Ruth Levitas points out conservatism cannot imagine wholly new Utopias. Even the new Right's plans for the future must find their roots in past Edens when Britain was 'one nation' (the oneness being of race not class) and human nature was still in its state of sin, sexual difference and anti-socialism. Such notions provide a common heritage for neo-liberals and neo-conservatives who might otherwise join forces only for pragmatic political reasons. The logical contradiction between the libertarians and authoritarians who make up the new Right of this book is the question that all the contributors discuss.

The shadow of the past Utopia which

feeds neo-liberal economic thinking is discernible in Andrew Gamble's essay, though he does not spell it out. The perfect economy, which can only be built on the defeat of interfering socialism, is that of the recreated 18th century. Its features are a state which does little beyond uphold the law, a society whose units are consumers and property-owning patriarchs, and an economy whose units are competing small businesses. It is a world before the fall, when the industrial revolution has not yet created multinationals, defence spending, empires or trade blocs. It is not until the realities of mass industrialisation intrude into the idyll of the absolutely free market - whether they are the union of the working class, the labour migrations of a neo-imperial economy, or the demands of women for equal access to the market - that the authoritarian Right has to step in to stamp out the conflict.

David Edgar sees this clash between right-wing values as one that was fought out in the 1970s. By the end of the decade, the authoritarians - preaching virtue - had defeated the libertarians - preaching freedom. They won because the fear of disorder was a more potent force than the pursuit of an economic dream. Why this should be is suggested by several contributors. It was 'The Sixties' (1965-75), a decade identified by right-wing demonology as a latter-day Sodom and Gomorrah when drugs, sex, free women, homosexuals, black aliens, nationalised industries and the welfare state between them brought Britain to the brink of ruin. Behind the language of freeing Britain from the chains of the state emerges another rhetoric of 'punishing' the country for its indulgence.

That historic period then can be seen as having unleashed in all conservatives a desire for a counter-reformation. They were united in wanting to end the social democratic reformation which the Left had been leading for the last 30, or 60,

years. But first the old guard of the Right, who had colluded in this reformation, had to be defeated. In this political project, it was the neo-liberals who blazed the trail with words of freedom and independence. It was the neo-conservatives who provided the language of a defence against disorder when the limits of ideology in creating an old new world were reached.

As a model for winning power - a flexible alliance that will bid for both cultural dominance and control of the state apparatus - this may seem enviable to the Left. And indeed, Gill Seidel argues that the new Right has adopted Gramsci's idea of hegemony, consciously in the case of the French and, no doubt, with intuitive pragmatism in the case of the British. Looked at from this standpoint, the conflicts within the Right appear less problems of abstract philosophy (how do you square personal freedom with the state erosion of civil liberties) than of political strategy.

But this raises a problem with the book. The contributors rarely explain why the new Right pressed its arguments hard at a particular time, nor what rescues disparate and possibly eccentric works from the past to turn them into the foundation stones of something called ideology today. It is legitimate to argue that ideology is something more than the mere adjunct of a political power struggle. But even in its own terms, ideology has to be more than the sum of the writings of the intellectuals of any particular group. The account must also include those who consume the ideology, the Conservative voters, the Moral Majority subscribers. It is the nature of their response to ideas which determines whether or not the ideas become that politically potent thing - an ideology.

Thus the energetic work of the new Right in redefining the language of racism to give us the essential oneness and historic destiny of English culture has found a powerful popular response - even if it is balked by the unmonolithic state (Ray

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# REVIEWS

Honeyford was, in the end, sacked.) The response to the similar efforts to redefine the family, sex and the meaning of life has been far more fractured. What the book cannot tell us is why this should be the case. Has feminism offered women of all parties a more powerful preventive against new Right ideas than socialism or anti-racism has in terms of class and race? Or is the subordination which women are required to accept in the name of morality incompatible with economic reality?

**Sarah Benton**