

REVIEWS

tion. The motor force for such changes, the authors argue, comes primarily from the changing demands of capital, not just British capitalism but a 'new global division of labour'.

Recognising and coming to terms with the kaleidoscope of working class experiences has never been easy for the labour movement. All too often a coincidence of interests has been assumed to exist between the latter and the working class, while in reality this has very rarely been the case. Blackwell and Seabrook are very aware of this problem. Yet their use of such arguments is quite contradictory; their insights into the immediate postwar period evaporate as they canter into the 1980s.

The 40s discussion opens in convincing and confident style. The distance between the rhetoric of the Labour party (or more precisely, labourism) and the changing realities of working class life are probed with considerable insight. The failures of labourism are located at the moment of its famous victory in 1945. What was not sufficiently recognised at the time was that the bonding which occurred between the labour movement and the majority of the working class occurred at a moment of unusual turbulence and, far from being a base which had been won for all time, was actually a precarious achievement which would have to be fought for in order to be retained.

As Blackwell and Seabrook argue, the majority of the working class have long proved more adept at learning to work the system than at transforming it. The neglect of this fundamental aspect of working class experience has led to the Left ascribing a strange innocence to the working class. Identifying with the labour movement represents only one strategy for the working class and its struggle to win a bit of colour and glamour in spite of the system.

Having debunked the myth of the 'golden age of labourism' the authors' explanation of the subsequent decades is far from convincing. The key argument is that capitalism has succeeded in imposing through its version of prosperity what it had been unable to impose through poverty. The real villain is capitalism entering people's psyches through the machinations of consumer society, which we are told, is: 'a society that also consumes; and it may be our humanity that is eaten up in the flames.' The working class becomes not the subject of history but the object,

defenceless against the cunning and subterranean power of external economic pressures. The moral outrage reaches its peak in the 60s with such gems as: 'for many people life became a permanent carnival in which no one knew with what partner the night would end' and, 'the conflict between Mods and Rockers was like a profane re-working of the medieval crusades, only this time, if there is a Jerusalem to be liberated from the hands of the infidels their heresy was called socialism.'

Yet profound economic and political restructuring was taking place at all levels of society in the 60s and 70s. It was a period of intense conflicts, a broadening of political understanding, setbacks and advances. The re-emergence of feminism, environmental campaigns, democratic initiatives at work and in the community helped to create important spaces in which people could assert greater control over their lives. Even Hurricane Maggie hasn't been powerful enough to halt such developments. That's why grasping the contradictory character of working class experiences is an integral part of unravelling that uneasy set of relationships between the labour movement and the working class.

Recent trends in the fragmentation of the working class hold both negative and positive possibilities for the Left. The impact of the recession has been massively uneven. New recruits to Thatcher's giro army and the emergence of mass poverty have been matched by improved living standards for sections of the working class. This offers a challenge to the Left not a capitalist *fait accompli*, as Blackwell and Seabrook suggest. Taking up that challenge means not simply moving beyond labourism but starting afresh. Yet apart from the mis-named title of the book's final section 'Moving Beyond Labourism with the Working Class' what we are offered is a perspective that parodies feminism, ignores the need to re-work alliances, and refuses to face up to the experiences of living today. The result is little different from labourism.

The postwar reconstruction of the working class and the current sorry state of the labour movement should be a spur to the Left to harness those considerable intellectual and political talents for a realistic socialist strategy for the rest of the century. Now that would be worth writing a book about.

Alan Booth



Things Ain't What They Used To Be

A World Still To Win

Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook
Faber £4.50

Apart from Chas 'n' Dave and the Left's lost time travellers, most people would agree that the working class isn't what it used to be. The significance of what Blackwell and Seabrook call this 'reconstruction of the postwar working class' is the subject of *A World Still to Win*.

The story opens with a 50 page plod through definitions of the working class. Karl Marx, Edward Thompson, Raymond Williams, Gareth Stedman Jones, Simon Hoggart, John Berger and Beatrix Campbell are called to give evidence for the book's central argument - that the working class is never static but is always in a state of continuous change. There is no such thing as a working class experience, but a range of experiences raked by contradictions, diversity and fragmenta-