

Zhores Medvedev on two responses to events in the USSR

Dialectical Opposites

In the light of the events at the end of 1989, Zbigniew Brzezinski's predictions of the collapse and disintegration of the communist system might seem to have proved true even more rapidly than he expected. At the same time they might cast doubts on Boris Kagarlitsky's assertion that the new political and social realities in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at last hold a good chance for a marxist reformist alternative. In practice, I don't think we are witnessing the death of communism because it has never yet been achieved anywhere in the first place. This is the final death of the Stalinist system and the collapse of the postwar order in Europe which artificially

academic credentials, seems to me rather superficial and selective. For Brzezinski, marxism never had a serious chance to survive because it was created outside a proper academic world and without scientific credentials. It was just 'the views elaborated by an emigre German-Jewish librarian and enthusiastically embraced by an obscure Russian political pamphleteer', and was so poor it could only apply in 'the quasi-oriental despotic tradition of a somewhat remote Euro-Asian empire'.

This kind of pseudo-academic arrogance makes the analysis of the factual historical material very one-sided and does not do justice to marxist doctrine. Any serious scholar who decides to analyse the history of capitalism in the period between 1900 and 1946 could also title their study 'The Grand Failure'. Europe and Asia were moving towards a period of world wars of unprecedented brutality and mass destruction. It was just this failure that gave marxist doctrine a chance to be tested in practice. This chance was real not only in an 'oriental despotic tradition', but also in Greece, Italy and even France.

Both Brzezinski and Kagarlitsky are right when they show that the economic competition in the postwar world was apparently won by the Western countries, and that the free-enterprise market economies proved to be more flexible. But when Kagarlitsky tries to argue that the economic mismanagement in the Soviet-bloc countries is not relevant to the ideas of 'reformist marxism', he is certainly closer to the real case than Brzezinski, who tries to explain all the economic problems of the Soviet Union and its satellites as inevitable failures of socialism. There was nothing socialist in the Soviet Union's attempt to isolate itself politically, technically and economically from the rest of the world, and to try to create a self-sufficient 'command economy' with a full state monopoly on everything. Many trends of political dissent in the Soviet

Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1950s and 60s considered this approach to the economy as anti-socialist and anti-marxist and predicted its eventual failure. The Soviet government simply transformed pseudo-marxism into the position of the immutable state religion with the promise of a future paradise in a form of 'communism'.

Predicting the future, however, is the weakest point of both authors. Brzezinski sees it in a form of renaming Red Square as the 'Freedom Square' (it is difficult to believe that he is ignorant about the fact that the 'red' in this case has nothing to do with socialism, and that the name was given to this square in the 15th century by Muscovites themselves) and by replacing the Lenin Mausoleum with an underground garage housing a museum of communist failures. Kagarlitsky expresses his hope that the popular fronts emerging in the Soviet republics will associate their activity with the aspirations of the working class and embrace reformist marxism

as their ideology. In the new democratic climate of glasnost and perestroika, he expects there to be a real opportunity for 'the modern skilled proletariat' to be 'the prop of the movement for structural reforms'. We can see now that these popular fronts thrive only if they actually proclaim nationalist, separatist and anti-socialist programmes.

But if the economic competition during recent decades seems to have been won by the rich Western countries, their triumph might not last long if no alternative to the consumer ideology is found. The demographic explosion and the environmental disasters which are linked with the attempts of poor countries to follow the American and European models may lead to a real global catastrophe. The dialectic of change makes it necessary to alter our main objectives and priorities and to adapt our requirements to the real potentials of our planet. If we do not do this, the 21st century may herald the death of many other political systems.

Lorna Sage on some mock-solemn fables

Levitations

Primo Levi's *The Mirror Maker* (Methuen, hbk £12.99) is a collection of short stories and articles done - rather in Flann O'Brien style - for the newspaper *La Stampa*, published in Primo Levi's native Turin. It's a remarkably homogeneous book nonetheless, redolent of the curiosity about humanity's chemistry that made *The Periodic Table* and *If Not Now When?* instant, unselfconscious classics. Levi, who worked all his life, including the part of it he spent in Auschwitz, as a research scientist, was immune to post-modern literary angst, though not to the spirit of playfulness. Here, you can see him indulging in all sorts of illusionist games: interviewing some of the creatures we share the planet with but seldom hear from (a

mole, a giraffe, a spider, a queen ant, an intestinal bacterium); imagining the mating dance of a couple of Platonic ideas; remembering how he disposed of his sister's toy Beretta tommy-gun; taking out a patent on a process for making time malleable. He is ingenious, economical and splendidly mock-solemn - a most practical joker.

The title story is about an invention nobody wants: a 'Metamir' you wear strapped to your forehead, that shows other people exactly how you see them. Another tale ('The Great Mutation') about a virus that causes people to grow wings, has a similar sad twist. He's fascinated by our fear of flying, and envies the Apollo astronauts their experience of weightlessness - partly, it seems, because he can never banish his own



Reforming Soviet structures

separated East from West and was imposed by coercion and repression.

It was predictable that both the intellectual representatives of the anti-marxist Right and marxist Left would try to interpret the disintegration of the Soviet empire from their respective positions. However, if *The Dialectic of Change* (Verso, hbk £29.95, pbk £9.95) is an extremely competent and often brilliant analysis of the nature and causes of the failures of the Stalinist (and partly leninist) model of Soviet-style bureaucratic socialism, *The Grand Failure*, (Macdonald, hbk £12.95) written by the author with much more impressive

Jeremy Green joins the Pynchon trail

Down The Tube

gravitas for long. Only a short story allows dreams to come true, and even then there's a disturbing coda: 'Through The Walls' conjures up an imprisoned alchemist who manages to sieve his versatile atoms through stone only to dissolve in his loving mistress's embrace. There's no set formula, however. Levi was sceptic enough to doubt his own scepticism.

The opinion pieces spell out his sombre but hopeful views on disarmament and the moral responsibility of scientists. He lived long enough to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the rising in the Warsaw ghetto, and to see revisionist German historians deny the uniqueness of the holocaust. They are branded as dangerous liars; and in any case 'no juridical system absolves one murderer because other murderers exist in the house across the street'. He makes space for grammatical grouches (sic!),



Primo Levi: Fear of flying

and for a defence of rhyme as an acrobatic test that sorts out the few real poets from the born ones (all the rest of us). A few of his own poems punctuate the book, and suffer in translation as the prose doesn't. One verse, however - 'I speak for you... you who have lost/The soul, the spirit, the wish to live' - sticks in the mind. Levi died three years ago in a fall down the stair-well of his apartment block, which was talked of in the Italian papers, though not in ours, as suicide.



Televsual irony in *Vineland*

What becomes of history in a culture of fleeting images? What happens to the historical novel when the past seems little more than the pretext for a television mini-series? Thomas Pynchon, perhaps the greatest American novelist to emerge since the second world war, is uniquely qualified to deal with such questions.

In three extraordinary novels, *V* (1963), *The Crying Of Lot 49* (1966) and the monumental *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), all written during a period of bold innovation in American fiction, Pynchon explored the darker recesses of 20th-century history, obsessively searching for signs of order and symptoms of decay. Along with this dour vision went an extravagant gift for comedy and a brilliantly inclusive style, in which pop culture jostled modern science and soaring lyricism tumbled into slapstick.

Pynchon is the ghost in the cellar of American letters. He has not been seen in public since 1963, or published a novel for 17 years. In this context, *Vineland* (*Secker and Warburg, hbk £14.95*) will be a disappointment to the followers of the Pynchon cult. Readers expecting another *Gravity's Rainbow* will be disturbed by the anti-literary feel of the new book.

Where the earlier novel found

metaphors in poetry and physics, *Vineland* is saturated with references to bad tv and takes the machinery of its plot from sources as unwholesome as kung fu movies and sitcoms. But by means of this calculated schlock effect Pynchon produces a haunting image of Reagan's America, an environment where incompatible states and categories flow into each other, and where the living and the dead come together for therapy and revenge.

The time is 1984, the place Northern California. Federal budget cuts trigger a convergence of fading radicals, hippies and government agents on the 'megalopolis' of *Vineland*, a complex of shopping malls and redwood forest just off Highway 101. Brock Vond, a federal agent, descends on *Vineland's* hippie hide-aways and ransacks them in search of his old love Frenesi Gates.

Also searching for Frenesi is the daughter she abandoned in the aftermath of the 60s, Prairie, who learns about her mother's involvement with a radical film collective and her betrayal of the short-lived 'People's Republic of Rock 'n' Roll'. Frenesi has been living incognito ever since, working as an FBI informant.

Into this scenario Pynchon weaves a resonant history of the American Left from union activity in the 1930s,

through the McCarthy era, to the antic disposition of the New Left. Characters sift through these attenuated memories, trying to uncover reasons for the failure of American radicalism and piece together some resistance to 'ol' Raygun'.

But this deeply-felt attempt to nurture a tradition collides with responses more typical of the 80s. History is played through once more, but this time as tv. References to *Star Trek* and *The Brady Bunch* patter incessantly through Pynchon's busy narrative. Characters hum theme tunes and imagine their lives as biopics. At times, reading *Vineland* is like scanning the pages of some darkly ironic tv guide, where you might tune in to Woody Allen in *Young Kissinger* or catch Sean Connery in *The G Gordon Liddy Story*.

This bitter mimicry of television is an immense risk, and it has to be said that it doesn't always come off. A few of the episodes in *Vineland* seem as silly and sentimental as daytime fodder. But Pynchon's scope and his sensitivity to American voices more than compensate; and his style - darting, jagged and allusive - is superbly attuned to his perceptions. It makes much recent American fiction seem as substantial as styrofoam.