

## Reviews

### Espiocracy

**John Le Carré, *A Most Wanted Man*, Hodder & Stoughton, 350 Pages, cloth ISBN 9780340977064, £18.99**

James Rubin, during his brief and ill-starred career as an 'anchor' man for Sky News, defined 'extraordinary rendition' as an operation when the authorities in the country from which the US was rendering its captives didn't know what was happening. When the authorities did know what was going on, that was simply 'rendition' as usual. Madeleine Albright's junior at the Department of State during President Clinton's second term seemed to have some direct experience of rendition and how it is practised by United States agencies.

According to Rubin's definition, the pending rendition of Issa and Abdullah, innocent and 'five per cent bad' respectively, at the conclusion of John Le Carré's new novel would appear to be not at all 'extraordinary'. Their snatch in Hamburg is facilitated by regional and Federal German agencies, even to the extent of disabling the plans of Günther Bachmann, experienced spook, who thought he had the support of German foreign intelligence.

Bachmann contends that Hamburg was 9/11's second ground zero. Mohamed Atta, who flew one of planes into New York's Twin Towers on that sunny September morning, came from Cairo to Hamburg in 1992 to continue his architectural studies. In due course, he joined with others to plan the attacks on the United States. How had German intelligence failed to stop this? The answer lies in part in the failure to recruit influential persons in the Muslim community, according to Bachmann. Recruiting and running agents is what he is good at. He has demonstrated this in Beirut and elsewhere, although not always to the satisfaction of his superiors in the 'espiocracy', as le Carré styles it. But such skill is no longer highly valued or appreciated by the German intelligence operation, it seems. Instead, they increasingly take their cue from the United States agencies, assisted closely by SIS, the United Kingdom's Special Intelligence Service. This is 'justice from the hip' for those who 'kill Americans'. Will that change under President Obama?

All the hallmarks of a good Le Carré romp are here: breakneck pace, gathering tension, plots within plots. There is the Red Army colonel who,

in the 1980s, sensed which way the wind was blowing and joined the SIS payroll. He was a 'cultured' Russian with a penchant for Tchaikovsky and Turgenev, which he has passed on to his confused and rootless son, Issa, whose Chechen mother was killed by her own family because of her relationship with the colonel. Here are echoes of Le Carré's 'cultured' and clever spooks of Soviet times, whom George Smiley seemed to admire somehow, although he knew he shouldn't.

By contrast, the British spooks are bereft of redeeming features. The 'sulphurous' older generation (John Scarlett?), who learned their trade during the Cold War, is giving way to young men from the English Midlands who utter the most direct threats to get their way. No charm at all.

Almost every character in *The Most Wanted Man* is trying it on. Annabel Richter, Issa's young German lawyer who works with refugees, is recruited by Bachmann. The Scottish Banker, Brue, sees in Annabel his own somewhat estranged daughter, and yet somehow falls for her, too. He is recruited by SIS, following in his own father's footsteps. *Fathers and Children*, the title of Turgenev's novel about nihilism, which is often mistranslated as 'Fathers and Sons', sums up a key part of the energy of Le Carré's twenty-first novel, which is dedicated to his grandchildren, born and unborn. May the legacy continue to grow.

*Tony Simpson*

## Denying Denial

**Stan Cox, *Sick Planet: Corporate Food and Medicine*, Pluto Press, 220 pages, paperback ISBN 978 07453 2740 2, £14.99**

Stan Cox is described on the cover of this book as a senior scientist at the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas. He worked for the US Department of Agriculture from 1984 to 1996. He has a PhD in plant genetics.

The theme of his book is ecological sustainability. The author's broad conclusion is that profit-driven market economics is leading to environmental degradation, ill health, and resource depletion. The detailed studies include the distorted priorities of US health care, the 'disease mongering' of pharmaceutical companies worldwide, the energy cost of chemical fertilisers, and the irreconcilability of growth in energy consumption and population with finite resources of fossil fuel.

India is rich in the renewable energy sources of sunlight and wind, and the author sees the replacement of fossil fuels with such sources, combined

with less use of chemical fertiliser and better water management, as a way of responding to climate change, which he finds has already resulted in reduced rainfall in 12 of 36 regions in India. He describes a recently suspected effect of industrial pollution of the atmosphere in India and elsewhere where the formation of 'brown clouds' limits the evaporation of water from the oceans and, while to some extent countering global warming, produces less rainfall. Also with some personal experience of India he describes the links between local government corruption and the toxic pollution of already deprived areas resulting in what he calls 'ecological sacrifice zones' and 'Bhopal in slow motion'.

Although the subtitle of the book, *Corporate Food and Medicine*, suggests a narrower field, it soon becomes clear that the author's concern is the degradation of the planet, not least by resource depletion. He asks how can an increasing population be fed when the oceans are fished not only for food but also for fuel and fertilizer.

When writing the book the author must have been aware that the strategy of 'Shock and Awe', the 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', the 'Operation Enduring Freedom', and other interventions in Middle East affairs were connected with oil supplies. The rapid rise of energy prices, the fear of recession, the mortgage-credit crisis, and the collapse of some of the world's leading banks probably occurred while the book was with the publisher, and if he were writing a post-script Stan Cox would surely want to know how the threats to attack Iran also affected the price of oil, the energy futures market, and the subsequent train of events. It is impolitic to mention the war, but it remains necessary. Much of that is implied, and what the book does focus on is the sustainability of capitalism itself. Short references to Kant and Marx provide the hints that this is coming, and that some of his American readers may need some preparation for it.

Economic growth is essential to capitalism because enterprises that are not growing are vulnerable to collapsing share value, loss of credit worthiness, and insolvency. We then have to work out how 'sustainable growth' is to be achieved alongside the targets now being set for an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050 only to *mitigate* the economic effects of climate change.

In the final chapter of the book the author speculates briefly how capitalism may be changed. A refusal to be ruled by a tiny class of owners is essential, and he expects that will bring 'terrible retaliation'. The author envisages other changes that may modify capitalism, looking particularly, but not too hopefully, to Europe. He offers that '... to believe that the Soviet road is the only way to a post-capitalist society is to have no

imagination', and quotes sympathetically the ecosocialist view that 'capitalism is working about as well as any pyramid scheme does before it goes bust'. What prescience!

Stan Cox does not claim to have an answer, but he suggests that 'stiff regulation' of business, more worker ownership worldwide, green taxes, the enforcement of anti-trust laws, and the redistribution of wealth will put useful pressure on the system, and that many small co-operative initiatives will be needed. (Better regulation hasn't really been tried because 'regulatory reform' still translates to deregulation, and only recently a committee of MPs proposed the deregulation of the insurance market!) The highest obstacle, and an essential first step, the author says, is to give up on denial.

*Christopher Gifford*

### Neoliberalism Dissected

**Jim Stanford, *Economics for Everyone – A Short Guide to the Economics of Capitalism*, Pluto Press, 360 pages, ISBN 9780745327501 (paperback), £12.99, ISBN 9780745327518 (hardback), £40.00**

Commencing with the maxim 'never trust an economist with your job', Jim Stanford sets out to demystify and free economics from the hands of academic obscurantism, or, as he calls it, 'complicated technical mumbo-jumbo'. This is an extremely laudable ambition and a very necessary one, given the assumed certainties of much of the 'informed' economic opinion with which we are daily bombarded from the media's pundits and politicians alike, perhaps a little more chastened of late given our 'credit crisis'. Even Mr. Greenspan has had second thoughts. The author is a Canadian trade unionist and economist, working for the Canadian Auto Workers Union, so I think it is pretty safe to make the assumption that he understands the realities of working life in an advanced industrial society in thrall to the ideological diktats of neoliberalist economics, and seeks to bring genuine enlightenment. In fact the whole book could be read as a highly successful criticism of neo-liberalism in areas where it claims some success, in particular, investment, global development and wealth creation.

The book exudes a practical and clear style taking the reader logically through what is complex territory without managing to either befuddle or induce narcolepsy — quite an achievement for a book on economics. In fact, I don't think there is one algebraic formula within it, and the various

diagrams illustrating the circulatory nature of economic processes are clear and informative. Throughout the book pithy illustrations lighten the text and provide a humorous lift, very much an improvement on the usual economic textbook illustrations of death by a thousand supply and demand curves! For those who wish to take their studies further there is a dedicated website connected to the book ([www.economicsforeveryone.com](http://www.economicsforeveryone.com)), which would be of obvious help.

Sandford takes us through the usual territory: a brief insight into economic history and its present day evolution into capitalism, followed by a tour of the basics of capitalism, its driving forces and inherent contradictions. We move on to the functioning of capitalism and its complexities, covering, for example, investment and growth, the environment, banking, finance and the stock market, globalisation, inequality, the role of government, and the important question of capitalism's ups and downs. With regard to the latter, the present economic crisis would have possibly made a difference to its emphasis in the book, but certainly not to its overall content or conclusion. As one would expect, the present recession confirms many of the ideas put forward. *Economics for Everyone*, of course, by its very nature covers a vast area of human knowledge and action, and serves as an admirable introduction to the subject, but it also manages to serve as an active agitational text.

It is clear is that the book is meant to inspire practical activity, as well as elucidating the niceties of economics. Clearly, one of the primary target audiences for the text is the trade union activist, if not ordinary members, and, pleasingly, the author is in no doubt of the importance of a vibrant, forceful and numerically large trade union movement. This comes in the context of the precipitous fall in trade union membership in the advanced industrial nations since the 1970s. For, to quote the author on the importance of trade unions:

‘No society without strong and effective unions has ever achieved truly mass prosperity. The degree of unionisation is one of the most important factors determining wage levels, the incidence of poverty, and hours of work.’

The concluding part of *Economics for Everyone* is one of the most stimulating, touching as it does on the question of the overall evaluation of capitalism, its possible improvement, or abolition. Through the novel mechanism of a checklist the author acknowledges the successes of capitalism in terms of innovation and choice and, of course, significant progress in terms of prosperity for some, examining these factors in the context of the failures of Soviet socialism and social democracy. (In this

context I fear his opinion may be a little too northern hemispherically-centred, but, of course, there's always the growth success of China to take into account). The thrust of his closing argument seems to be that we should fight 'to make our respective countries more like the Nordic variant of capitalism and less like the Anglo-Saxon version'. He couples this with an admirable 'reformers shopping list', which we could add to or amend in the light of our particular national peculiarities. He admits that 'Socialists have no obvious roadmap to guide their quest for a fundamentally more just and democratic economy', so maybe the main thing is to begin the journey, and this book will serve as a useful practical guide.

*John Daniels*

### **The Economics of Inequality**

**Polly Toynbee & David Walker, *Unjust Rewards*, Granta, 256 pages, ISBN 9781847080936, £12.99**

This book contains all the statistics on inequality in the UK that you would expect from David Walker, and the informative interviews you would want from Polly Toynbee. The latter range from the very wealthy to the very poor. The former reveal an astonishing ignorance of, and lack of concern, for the lives of their less advantaged fellow human beings, and the latter an exceptional lack of anger or hope concerning their condition. Both of these responses suggest great difficulties in making any correction in these disparities. The scale of the inequalities revealed by the statistics is appalling. The earnings of top company executives can be anything up to a thousand times the minimum wage, and that wage provides less than two-thirds of what a family of four needs to live on. Excuses for such high salaries and extra compensation range from fear that the best brains might otherwise leave the country, to a belief that extra pay is needed to get the best out of people. There is no evidence for these assumptions, and the argument is applied only to the rich and not to the poor. About one-fifth of the UK population have household incomes below the official poverty line. That is two-thirds of the general standard of living for thirteen million people, most of the adults being in work. For the children it means no toys, no holidays, an unhealthy diet apart from school meals, and little incentive to study.

What is most disturbing in the statistical picture is that under 'New' Labour the gap between the rich and the poor has been widening. There

may have been some narrowing up to 2004, but since then the rich have been getting richer and the poor actually poorer. It is not only the super-rich who have been gaining – executive pay rising by up to 30% to 40% a year while public sector pay rises have been held down by government to 2%. The Government's aim was to end child poverty, as the Scandinavians had done. Of the 3.4million children in poverty in 1998, the number was down by 600,000 in 2006, and nobody expects that the aim of halving the total will be achieved by 2010, particularly after the effects of the current financial crisis. Child tax credits have done most to alleviate child poverty, but they often mean that employers rely on this supplement to keep down the wages they pay. The Sure Start programme of child centres is probably the most imaginative and effective way of ending child poverty, and at the same time raising the educational level of the one-third of the population which is innumerate and can barely read and write. But there are only very few centres so far, and £7.2 billion a year would be needed to make them universal. The UK spends only 0.5% of GDP on the under fives, compared with 1.0% in France and 2.0% in Denmark, and in the new financial crisis such provision would hardly be a priority.

Even the middle classes can be shown to have been suffering. To take one example, a place at a private boarding school, which would almost certainly guarantee a place at Oxford or Cambridge or at one of the other more prestigious universities, now costs around £20,000 a year, excluding uniforms and books. Most of Middle England, according to focus groups, would be prepared to pay more taxes for education, but that was before the financial crisis. Toynbee and Walker, in the last chapter of the book on what needs to be done, recommend a large increase in taxes on the rich, and especial attention to taxing those who claim not to be domiciled in the UK, and employ other means of tax evasion in tax havens, all this combined with generally much more transparency about incomes, so as to develop what they call a 'pro-tax culture'. They suggest a property tax and strengthening inheritance taxes, with increased earmarking of taxes to benefit the poor, and laws to strengthen equal pay for women. All this must appear totally utopian in the light of the current financial crisis and the means proposed by the Government for bailing out the banks. But it suggests what might be done if a movement could be built to end Government's bribes to the rich and replace this with benefits for all, and especial protection for the poor. Such a policy would need to be based on an understanding that has escaped Toynbee and Walker's study of injustice, and that is that increasing inequalities have always been the cause of capitalist crises, the poor majority becoming increasingly unable

to buy what is produced, and the rich with consequently no incentive to invest their capital in productive activity, choosing instead financial speculation.

*Michael Barratt Brown*

### Asiatic Mode

**Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 5, Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 11: Ferrous Metallurgy* by Donald B. Wagner, Cambridge University Press, 478 pages, £120**

**Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 7, The Social Background, Part 2: General Conclusions and Reflections*, edited by K. G. Robinson, Cambridge University Press, 284 pages, ISBN 9780521087322, £84**

Joseph Needham died in 1995, but now, well into the next Century, his great work still continues. The first two volumes of his titanic *History of Science and Civilisation in China* were conventional single volumes, albeit volumes of incredible density and profundity. But by now there are twenty-four separate volumes, which have been continuously emerging during half a century of progress. Volume 3 was the first to subdivide into three ponderous books. By the time that we reached Volume 5, on *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, the subdivisions had rocketed ahead, and this text on *Ferrous Metallurgy* is the eleventh book in this volume.

It has been a long time in gestation. Needham asked Donald Wagner to collaborate in the *History* in the very early eighties, and work began in earnest in 1994, after much preliminary research. Wagner is not an uncritical follower of Needham, and he does not really think that Ferrous Metallurgy is a department of Chemical Technology. Neither does he follow the master in his appreciation of the social sciences, which he had deemed to be less than fully social and greatly less than fully scientific. But for all that, he is a worthy disciple of the great man, and his book is a splendid contribution to the Needham project.

My own interest in the technology of iron production was stimulated by Wu Dakun, the Chinese historian, who was a proponent of the Marxist schema of an Asiatic Mode of Production. Throughout his life he changed his opinion on this more than once, and indeed it remains rather an open question, having been dissected by Perry Anderson, among others. But by

1983 Wu contributed an essay to the little volume *Marxism in China* which we published in *Spokesman*. It was called *The Asiatic Mode of Production in History, as Viewed by Political Economy in its Broad Sense*. The first part of this essay concerns general questions about the views of Marx and Engels on a distinct Asiatic mode of production. It recapitulates the story, familiar to Western scholars, of the views of Marx and Engels as set out in the well-known *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Capital*, and elsewhere. But the second part concerns the applicability of these doctrines to actual Chinese history, from the dawn of the Iron Age onwards.

Wu Dakun maintains that in China, just as in Europe, iron ploughs transformed the system of farming, and introduced the Asiatic type of land tenure referred to by Marx. In a summary of his arguments, which shows quite remarkable conciseness as well as breadth of vision, Wu Dakun demonstrates the exceptional features which characterise Chinese evolution, and establish the institutions which later prevented the development of a native Chinese form of capitalism.

I was very privileged to meet with Wu Dakun at a peace conference in Beijing about a year later. I reminded him of a much earlier article he had contributed to the English journal, *Past and Present*, and I also asked him about his relationship with Joseph Needham.

I was surprised to learn that Wu Dakun himself had proposed to Needham that he should embark upon a history of Chinese sciences whilst both of them were working in Chungking during the Second World War. I later mentioned this conversation to Needham himself, who spoke most warmly of Wu Dakun. Together we agreed that it would be a good idea to organise a symposium on the asiatic mode of production or the historical dynamics of Asiatic societies, and to invite Wu Dakun to participate in it. It took a long time to find the means to arrange for such a meeting, but finally we did secure the resources with the help of a generous contribution from Ahmed Ben Bella, the founding President of Algeria, who told me that he had read the French translation of the first volume of Needham's magisterial work whilst he was under house arrest in Msila. Unfortunately, Wu Dakun was not, in the event, able to join us for this meeting, which was to be held in Needham's Institute in Cambridge.

It is a thousand pities that Wu Dakun is not available to tell us about his reaction to the touring exhibitions of the Terracotta Warriors, the funerary guardians of the grandiose tomb of the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty. Popular history is now flourishing throughout Western Europe, tracing the despotic lineaments of that Emperor. But Wu Dakun asks many other

serious questions about the role of iron technologies in the development of the economies of the Warring States, which go deeper than the shock and horror of despotism.

Some time later, I went back to China with Stuart Holland, on behalf of Neil Kinnock, the then Leader of the British Labour Party. We arranged various meetings with the Chinese Communist leadership, with a view to securing Chinese participation in a conference of the Socialist International on the themes of the Brandt Report on North-South development questions, in the preparation of which Stuart had played a significant role.

We were invited to meet with Qiao Shi, who had recently been appointed to the Politburo. He arranged a banquet in the Great Hall of the People, where we were surprised to find ourselves meeting with the British Ambassador. Stuart began to tease the Ambassador about the Mandarinate, and he became quite cross, because Mandarins were not then flavour of the month in China, even if the behaviour of modern leaders was sometimes reminiscent of earlier times. To shift the subject into a less contentious area, Qiao Shi turned to me, and asked me for my views on the part played by the development of iron technologies in the period of the Warring States. Evidently he must have been familiar with the fact that I had been involved in publishing the Wu Dakun paper, because that at that time furnished the sum total of my knowledge on this, to us, somewhat exotic subject.

The Chinese Communists did attend the meeting of the Socialist International on the Brandt Report in Peru, but shortly afterwards political crises in China changed all the personnel in the leadership, and Qiao Shi disappeared from the top table. My friend, Su Shaozhi, from his eminent position as Director of the Institute of Marxism, Leninism and Mao Tse-Tung Thought, was to find himself in exile.

Far away in Cambridge, I pursued the project for a symposium on the Historical Dynamics of Oriental Societies with Joseph Needham, and this took place in 1990.

Joseph Needham tells us in the first volume of his *History* that the State of Qin in Shantung was notable for two powerful reasons. It was a major source of salt, and it led the way in the working of iron. Iron had become known in China by 500 BC and the Qin's mastery of iron technologies gave it a pre-eminence 'which may well have been significant in their bid for power'.

As iron technologies prospered, 'we also enter the greatest period of intellectual development in ancient China. The "one hundred schools" of

philosophers were at their height between 500 and 250 BC ... During this period academies of scholars were set up, the most famous being the Academy of the Gate of Chi (Chi-Hsia) at the Chhi capital.' Increased productivity with iron ploughs helped all the arts to prosper, not only those of war.

Donald Wagner can add a great deal to Needham's early insights, both here and in his pathbreaking collection of essays and lectures called *The Grand Titration*. Wagner does this from the archaeological record, which has burgeoned in recent years. He can trace the discovery of iron artefacts across the centuries; some of the findings from the minus eighth century are clearly made from cast iron while others are made from wrought iron. Whilst wrought iron came to China from the West, iron casting was a Chinese invention. A luxury iron dagger wrought with other metals was found in a royal tomb (in the northern part of Chu) dated to the end of the minus sixth century. But equally old iron implements for practical use have been found at another Chu settlement.

In the northern Chinese States, at this time, the production of bronze was concentrated in a few large centres, and developed into a high art, producing castings 'which are among the finest the world has known, even in modern times'. Because of the extreme scarcity of copper, the incentive to develop processes for casting iron became that much greater. The earlier cast iron implements so far discovered have been implement caps found in the minus fourth century and later. The original advantage of cast iron implements was that they were cheaper than bronze. But they were brittle, and 'for most purposes not a good material'.

It was not until the beginning of the minus third century that there is evidence for a widespread use of iron throughout China.

In minus three hundred China consisted of a group of 'Warring States', although one of these had begun to conquer some of the others. This process was to lead to the unification of the States in the Qin Empire (or Chin, or Chhin in the various transliterations used in the earlier Needham volumes). The Qin Empire consolidated itself in minus 220, creating a highly centralised administration and embarking upon very large-scale public works, such as the first Emperor's mausoleum, now famous for the Terracotta Army which guarded it, the Great Wall, a long distance road system, and centralised stores for the husbanding of grain.

The Qin Empire soon over-extended and gave rise to peasant uprisings which brought about its downfall and the establishment of a new Empire, the Han, in minus 206. It was the Han Empire which introduced a State monopoly in the salt and iron industries, bringing new possibilities for

technical development.

Mencius, writing at the end of the minus fourth century, recorded a dialogue on the developing division of labour.

‘Does Master Xu cook with a (metal) pot and a (earthenware) steamer?’

‘Does he till with iron implements?’

‘Yes’

‘Does he make them himself?’

‘No, he trades grain for them.’

‘Trading grain for implements does not inflict hardship on the potters and founders. And when the potters and founders trade implements for grain, does this inflict hardship on the peasants? How can it be that Master Xu does not establish his own pottery and foundry? Why does he go about trading with the one hundred craftsmen? Why does he bother?’

‘The work of the one hundred craftsmen certainly cannot be done while tilling.’

If Mencius’s thoughts were compiled in minus three hundred, they record a State in which iron implements were so common in China that they were regarded as necessary: but outside China they would be extremely uncommon everywhere.

Another assumption noted by Wagner is that the production of iron implements was a specialist craft which the peasant ‘would be foolish to take up himself’.

Just as agriculture was transformed by iron, so was warfare. ‘Iron tipped lances reached the enemy, and those without strong helmets and armour were injured.’ While shields and bronze battle-axes were effective in ancient times, now they have been superseded by iron weapons and armour.

But the Qin did not necessarily prevail because of superiority in iron production. Here archaeological evidence is abundant, but rather difficult to interpret. Numerous graves have been excavated, uncovering many iron artefacts. The earlier graves have few such objects, but later there are many. However, the funerary traditions in the Qin Empire were different from those in the other Warring States, and the dearth of iron weapons in surviving Qin evidence may therefore lack significance.

Just as iron tools are not always better than bronze ones, bronze weapons can sometimes be more fit for purpose than iron ones. Crossbow locks were normally made of bronze, because these locks were precision mechanisms cast to very close tolerances, and ‘bronze is far superior to iron in this sort of work’.

Considering the rise of the State of Qin, Wagner tells us:

‘It is often suggested that the key to Qin’s success lay in a technological superiority in weaponry, but real proof has never been forthcoming. Qin’s first major conquest was in the southern state of Chu: if it is correct, ... that iron weapons were not used here, then this may be an example of a technological superiority contributing to Qin’s success. (Definite proof that Qin’s iron weapons were in fact superior to Chu’s bronze weapons is still needed.) But Qin’s further conquests cannot be explained in this way, for the evidence seems to be incontrovertible that iron had almost entirely replaced bronze for weapons throughout north China by the early decades of the -3<sup>rd</sup> century. If the hypothesis is to be saved, we must look rather to a superiority in the *organisation* of the production of iron weapons.

Weapons were made by smiths of wrought iron and steel. The technique of the smith is to a significant extent the same throughout the world and throughout history, and everywhere there are master smiths and incompetent smiths. We should therefore not expect to find much difference between Qin and the rest of north China in the smiths’ actual techniques of production of weapons, but should look instead to the production of the smith’s raw material. We know little about pre-Han primary iron-production techniques, but it seems likely that there was not much variation from place to place in ancient China: in iron production the most important variation was not in its underlying technique, but perhaps in its organisation. Production of iron in a blast furnace is most efficient at a high level of production, and mass production requires a large market, good transportation, and a large and reliable labour force. All these factors would be more easily forthcoming in the “totalitarian” state of Qin than in the more “feudal” states of north China. Qin’s political practice and ideology made possible a reliable and efficient production of iron implements and weapons; this gave Qin an economic and military advantage over the other states; and this advantage made the Qin conquest possible.’ (pages 146-7)

Wagner offers rich evidence from recent excavations which enables us to test the hypothesis of earlier scholars. It also enables us to identify questions which cannot at present be answered with any degree of certainty, and suggests important areas of further research.

In *The Grand Titration*, Needham discusses the influence of river controls and irrigation on the centralisation of power and authority in the Qin and later Empires. The water works transcended the barriers between separate territories of individual feudal or proto-feudal lords.

‘It thus invariably tended to concentrate power at the centre, i.e., in the bureaucratic apparatus arched above the granular mass of “tribal” clan villages. I think it played an important part therefore in making Chinese feudalism “bureaucratic”. Of course it does not matter from the standpoint of the historian of science and technology how different Chinese feudalism was from European

feudalism, but it has got to be different enough (and I firmly believe that it was different enough) to account for the total inhibition of capitalism and modern science in China as against the successful development of both these features in the West.’ (page 204)

Wagner’s book has an awesome trajectory, from ancient China through the whole sweep of history. He generously records his debt to Needham, who laid the foundations for this phenomenal work, and had begun studying the history of ferrous metallurgy in China in the early 1950s. This has been an exemplary collaboration, building our knowledge and testing received wisdom in a continuously creative way.

*Ken Coates*

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From the beginning the seventh volume of Needham’s *History* was scheduled to be the last. In fact it split itself in two, and this second part, concluding the series, appeared in 2004. It is encouraging that it has already needed a reprint, just as we can draw encouragement that this final book is by no means the last, since intermediary volumes continue to emerge. The earlier books, much subdivided, continue to generate massive further contributions, and establish a veritable Needham industry. Needham told us that when a book was too bulky to read safely in the bath, then it must be split into its constituent parts. However, when the constituent parts themselves are too bulky to read in the bath, neither science nor civilisation has any easy remedy at hand.

Kenneth Robinson, who edited this last word, has put great love into it. We learn many things that not everyone will consider essential to its daunting subject, such as that Needham’s mother composed the music for the anthem *Nelly Dean*, to whose strains some of us misspent our youth during too many closing time choruses. Or the quatrain we owe to Francesca Bray, the author of the section of Volume Six of the *History*, on Agriculture:

*Dr Joseph Needham*  
*Dances with philosophic freedom*  
*You’d better watch your toes if*  
*You dance with Joseph*

Robinson tells us bluntly what is the agenda of this ultimate volume:

‘we are most concerned ... with the great question of why modern science did not arise in China after so many centuries of technical leadership, and closely connected with this, why it was that modern capitalism did not develop in China.’

It was the effort to explain these matters that involved Needham in a study of the Asiatic Mode of Production, as set forth by Marx and Engels, and developed in the early works of Wittfogel in the German language. It also provoked the idea that historic China could be described as ‘the prime example of “bureaucratic feudalism”.’ Needham recalls sitting with the Australian ambassador in a teahouse in Szechuan when the ambassador exclaimed how medieval everything was. ‘You could almost expect to see a knight and men-at-arms come riding by.’ Needham said ‘yes’ but ‘it wouldn’t have been a knight but rather a civilian official, and the men-at-arms would have been represented by unarmed servitors carrying his titles and dignities on placards’. Force was better concealed by Chinese bureaucrats.

This volume recapitulates many of the arguments first raised in *The Grand Titration*, and indeed whole chapters of that seminal work. True, it fails to close the file on the Needham question: but it does leave us with a sense of lively wonder, of awe at the power of the human mind. Mark Elvin, in his foreword, likens it to completing a reading of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*. Yes, it is also a giant work of scholarship. But no, it is not a conclusion, but a prelude. Beyond this peak, new ridges shall arise.

KC

### TomDispatch

**Tom Engelhardt (editor), *The World According to TomDispatch: America in the New Age of Empire*, Verso, 346 pages, paperback ISBN 9781844672578, £10.99**

This book grew out of internet exchanges between Tom Engelhardt, his friends, colleagues and acquaintances who wanted to rally dissident opinion on the foreign policy pursued by George W. Bush as President of the United States. The contributors are nearly all American, and all are extremely well-informed, including figures such as Noam Chomsky and Mike Davis. They provide a devastating home-grown critique of the US and its international relations under George W. Bush.

American policy is correctly described as imperialist. The 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers gave the Bush entourage a pretext for launching their plans to implement the aims envisaged in the concept of the New American Century. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the so-called neo-cons around Bush argued that the US must do everything possible to prevent the development of rival power centres, whether friendly or hostile.

American efforts to offset China's growing importance to this end have included obstructing possible reunification with Taiwan, and efforts to use Japan as a surrogate counter-balance by reversing post-war US opposition to Japanese rearmament.

The United States has sought to retain its influence in Latin America, but elections have increasingly brought to power governments that are not only critical of unbridled capitalism, but have also insisted on pursuing independent policies. Colombian counter-insurgency operations continue to be supported in the hope of shoring up its position, but the US has been unsuccessful in its attempts to brand Venezuela under Chavez as a pariah state, and to limit his influence in the region as a whole.

United States policy has, above all, failed in the efforts expended to subdue Iraq and Afghanistan by force of arms. The book makes an irresistible case against the invasion of Iraq. Oil loomed large in its motivation, but the attempt to put oil reserves in the hands of the major international oil companies has encountered stiff resistance.

Paul Bremer, as head of the US occupation, instituted a flat tax, abolished tariffs, cancelled laws preventing foreign ownership of Iraqi companies, and permitted full repatriation of profits abroad. However, favoured American companies such as Halliburton and Bechtel – which were brought in as Republican cronies – have failed to restore the economy, despite making rich pickings, and resistance to western dominance remains.

The deaths of huge numbers of Iraqis, the flight abroad of three million refugees (12% of the population), the collapse of living standards, and the catastrophic deterioration of security are brought out in this book.

The damage done to Iraq's heritage as the location of early civilisations is said to be the worst since the Mongol conquest of 1258. Museums have been vandalised and looted, ancient books and documents have been destroyed by fire, military bases have been built adjacent to the remains of ancient cities, and unique sites have been wantonly disfigured or despoiled.

A statement issued by George W. Bush and Tony Blair in April 2003, which is quoted, reveals the huge gap between what was promised and what has been delivered:

We reaffirm our commitment to protect Iraq's natural resources as the patrimony of the people of Iraq which should be used only for their benefit. [p. 107]

The decline in accepted standards of human rights is a feature of the administration. It includes the establishment of Guantanamo prison camp, the ill-treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and other centres, the redefinition of torture to justify 'water-boarding' and other methods of causing pain to

prisoners, and the practice of 'extraordinary rendition' of prisoners to countries where torture and ill-treatment are regularly inflicted on detainees.

Yet, despite all this and its huge military expenditure, the United States has been unable to subdue two underdeveloped countries. The book estimates that total Pentagon consumption of oil amounts to 340,000 barrels (four million gallons) every day [p. 215]. As one of the authors says, it would be both sad and ironic if the military began fighting wars mainly to guarantee its own fuel supplies.

The cost of all this has not been imposed on the wealthy. George W. Bush's tax cuts in 2003 gave \$93,500 to every millionaire while the poor were bled by cuts in income and social benefits.

*TomDispatch* counterbalances the continual flood of biased information retailed by the western media to convince the public that the policies pursued by President George W. Bush and his allies are in their interests and promote democratic principles. The book is packed with facts and arguments which totally expose the destructive, pernicious and cruel consequences of United States policy as conducted by the present administration. It helps to explain how America's standing in many parts of the world has further plummeted in recent years, and emphasises that the present policies are inevitably destined to fail. That is one reason why a change of direction is vital.

*Stan Newens*

## Contentious Figure

**Wilfred Burchett, edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin, *Rebel Journalism: The Writings of Wilfred Burchett*, Forewords by John Pilger and Gavan McCormack, Cambridge University Press, 336 pages, paperback ISBN 9780521718264, £15.99**

I suspect that the name of Wilfred Burchett may be unfamiliar to many *Spokesman* readers. I am not suggesting any blame on their part, but merely that Burchett's writings should be better known, and that his fellow countrymen should recognise and acknowledge his contribution. This can be achieved with the aid of this text, an anthology of his writings spanning his career as a journalist from the 1940s to the 1980s.

He published innumerable articles and more than 30 books. The writings included in this collection bring together most of the above, beginning with the Second World War, his acclaimed reports on Hiroshima following America dropping the atom bomb, Eastern Europe, Korea,

Russia, Laos, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Angola, Zimbabwe and other areas from which Burchett reported.

Wilfred Burchett was born in Australia in 1911, and has been described as ‘the greatest journalist and war correspondent Australia has ever produced’. Any fair-minded person would endorse this judgment, and yet he became, and sadly remains, a contentious figure. (The reviews of this text, when it was published in Australia in 2007, demonstrate that, in the eyes of right wing commentators, he merits the criticism and contumely which beset him throughout his life.)

Burchett’s strength and the acclaim he has won relate to his independence for, unlike many journalists, he refused to toe any official or government line. The obsessive attitude of figures in the Australian establishment is vividly illustrated by an incident, in 1951, when he was visiting Melbourne to lecture. The Lord Mayor cancelled his lecture on world development, asserting that ‘the letting of the town hall to a meeting in support of peace would be against the principles of the United Nations’. Later, when members of Burchett’s family resided alongside Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne, government spies speculated that their choice might well have been motivated by a desire to communicate with ‘the enemy’ (by submarine!). Readers should not be surprised that the notorious Peter Wright chose to retire to Australia.

There are a number of matters which I suspect will be of interest to *Spokesman* readers. Burchett was the first Western reporter to visit Hiroshima after the atom bomb was dropped. He was warned by Japanese press officers that ‘no one goes to Hiroshima: every one is dying there’. He slipped away from the press ‘pack’ and made his way to Hiroshima. The journey, mostly in darkness, is described. It demonstrates his courage. He travelled in a train packed with armed Japanese servicemen who, as one might have expected, were sullen and almost certainly bitter at the moment of their country’s defeat. Burchett’s report was widely circulated, and made the front page of the *Daily Express*. The headline is prescient: *I write this as a warning to the world*. Burchett reported, ‘thirty days after the first atom bomb destroyed the city and shook the world, people are still dying mysteriously and horribly – people who were uninjured in the cataclysm – from an unknown something’. In comprehending and focusing on what he described as the ‘atomic plague’, he drew attention to the experimental nature of this, the first use of a nuclear weapon against a defenceless civil population. It is claimed, and no doubt correctly, that he was never forgiven for having given a truthful account of the destruction of Hiroshima, and the impact of atomic radiation. At the time, the American

authorities sought to deny the truth of his reports, and the existence of the deadly radiation, which resulted in far more deaths than the impact of the explosion. 'It was a considerable ordeal to reach Hiroshima,' wrote the distinguished American journalist T. D. Allman when acknowledging Burchett's achievement, 'but it was an infinitely greater accomplishment, back then, to understand the importance of Hiroshima'.

I was also struck by Burchett's account of the American War in Vietnam, on which he reported extensively, and the recent references to the supposed heroism of McCain, and his conduct after being shot down over North Vietnam. Burchett records interviewing American prisoners of war who, much to their surprise, were well treated by their captors. He gives details of a conversation with an American Sergeant, who was injured when his base was attacked. Burchett reports him acknowledging that he was given immediate first aid when he was captured, and that the metal fragments resulting in his wounds were removed the day following. The Sgt. commented: 'They treated us real well – that's the main thing. No rough stuff of any kind. I never expected to be treated like that, a real surprise'. His report is revealing in pointing to the understanding of American servicemen as to the nature of the conflict, and the motivation displayed by Vietcong cadres whom he interviewed. He doesn't say so, but the conclusion is suggested by his report: American servicemen are 'thick' – obsessed with sport. He contrasts this with the realistic understanding of the Vietcong, and the sense of pride they must have felt in being Vietnamese. Having recently visited Vietnam, and seen the conditions under which they fought, I can attest this is no mere hyperbole.

Readers of my generation who lived through the American War in Vietnam and who cared about its outcome will have been struck by Burchett reporting a speech by the then Massachusetts Senator Kennedy, in 1954, when Vietnam was occupied by the French: 'To pour money, material and men into the jungle of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory would at least be dangerously futile and destructive ... No amount of American assistance in Indochina can conquer an enemy which is everywhere, and at the same time nowhere, an "enemy of the people" which has the sympathy and support of the people'. I found this passage revealing, and it led me to speculate whether the conflict would have intensified to the point it developed under Johnson, had Kennedy lived.

No account of Burchett's life and work would be complete without reference to his courage and social commitment, which began in the 1930s when assisting Jews to escape from Nazi Germany. He did so at considerable risk to himself. His reward, an abiding shame along with

much else on Australia's history, led to his losing his passport, and a refusal to allow him to visit and attend his father's funeral.

For seventeen years, Burchett and his children were denied passports by the Australian government. Despite their hostility, the government failed to bring any charge against him. The mean minded attitude of establishment figures is vividly expressed in a letter by a former Australian Prime Minister, Harold Holt. Writing in his capacity as Minister of Immigration, in 1965, he noted that Burchett 'left Australia fifteen years ago. He has not since returned, his wife is not an Australian ... in addition his activities since his departure forfeited any claim he might have had to the protection he would receive as the holder of an Australian passport'.

Cambridge University Press, Burchett's son and his colleague are to be congratulated on the production of this volume. Anyone wishing to learn more of the history of the latter half of the last century would gain much from reading the thirty texts which make up the anthology.

*Peter M. Jackson*

### **No More Spin!**

**James Harding, *Alpha Dogs: The Americans Who Turned Political Spin Into a Global Business*, Atlantic Books, 384 pages, hardback ISBN 9781843548171, £22**

I can well remember the early 1990s as a time of frantic political activity as the entire Eastern European state structures collapsed following the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As vice chair of the European Parliament's Delegation to South Eastern Europe, I was an observer at the elections in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. We made several visits to these countries during the run up to their elections, mainly to contact the political groups and parties seeking to take part in the electoral contests.

As the elections drew closer, the increasing number of American accents, buzzing like bees around the various political and government offices, became more and more apparent to me. During the latter stages of the campaigns, and after the counts, it became clear that there was a pattern emerging from the contests both within and across the countries involved. I would not go as far as to say the whole thing had been scripted, but it did appear as if many of those directing events had met at their Alma Mater.

James Harding has to some extent provided an explanation for me in his book *Alpha Dogs* or *How Political Spin Became a Global Business*. In it

he dwells on the rise and fall of an American company which dedicated itself to using new technologies to aid the campaigning of politicians and parties. It extended its techniques, which by then included the use of focus groups, to the commercial world. The book is all the better because the author takes time to round out the characters as if they were *dramatis personae*, as befits blurring the distinction between fact and fiction that is the stock in trade of the spin doctor. The tragic irony of it all lies in the ultimately worthless pursuit of populism. If everyone reads focus groups in the same manner, then what choice is there for the electorate? Instead of new technology and polling techniques encouraging people to go to the polls and make their free choice, we find that it is difficult to get more than half the population out to vote throughout the western world.

Through a narrative about running a single enterprise, Sawyer Miller, Harding helps to explain the way that the great American ideal of making the world a safe place for American capital is inserted, virus like, on a global stage. He also reveals the ability of companies such as Sawyer Miller to blow their own trumpets, and, indeed, for their employees to claim credit for popular uprisings such as Aquino's defeat of the appalling Marcos in the Philippines, as did Mark Malloch Brown, who was at this time a little known spin doctor. The techniques employed by this time had almost been routinised; keep the message simple, repeat it often, check how the focus groups are interpreting it, prepare material to go negative, and set up a network for polling day to give authenticity to claims of victory from your own exit poll. From The Philippines to Ukraine and Georgia we have seen the same pattern appearing. It is not surprising that Malloch Brown went on to serve George Soros, via his so called Open Society Institute, and, controversially, the Quantum Group of Funds.<sup>1</sup>

We do discover the occasional nugget. Regarding elections in the United Kingdom, for instance, one Joe Napolitan not only advised Marcos in The Philippines, but also Neil Kinnock in 1992. His comment on the latter encounter was: 'we knew it was a hopeless cause'. The promiscuity of these

<sup>1</sup> According to Wikipedia, 'The Quantum Group of Funds are privately owned hedge funds based on Curaçao (Netherlands Antilles) and Cayman Islands. They are currently advised by George Soros through his company Soros Fund Management. Soros started the fund in the early 1970s along with Jim Rogers. The shareholders of the funds are not publicly disclosed although it is known that the Rothschild family and other wealthy Europeans put \$6 million into the funds in 1969. In 1992, the lead fund, Soros's Quantum Fund, became famous for 'breaking' the Bank of England, forcing it to devalue the pound. Soros had bet his entire fund in a short sale on the prediction that the British currency would drop in value. It did so, a coup that netted him a profit of \$1 billion. In 1997, Soros was blamed for forcing sharp devaluations in Southeast Asian currencies.'

consultants knows no bounds. However, it was in their pursuit of the crock of gold that such great advisors to the rulers of the world came unstuck. Whilst so full of hubris that they felt able to advise on the running of states, they could not themselves run their own company, so that the collective mix of talents became self-destructive, and the leading lights went their own ways.

They have left a legacy, however, particularly in the use of high tech IT in elections, and the subsequent spiralling of costs of election campaigns. Instead of new technology opening up democracy to all the people, it has put the cost of entering the democratic process out of the reach of ordinary people. In the United States you need either to be a millionaire, or to be backed by one, to stand for any important election. The same has happened in the United Kingdom with Blair taking £1 million from Formula 1 motor racing, and European Union legislation on advertising tobacco being blocked in favour of F1. Separately, there has been the so-called 'cash for coronets' scandal concerning Labour Party funding. The introduction of focus groups has strapped the consultants across the input of campaign information, where they provide a subjective interpretation of unquantifiable data.

The importance of polling data is such that, in Nepal, a US group of political consultants who were trying to find out the views of villagers, sent a local pollster up in to the mountains. He was duly kidnapped by the Maoist rebels. As the poor wretch's luck would have it, the rebels sent a demand to yield up the polling data or the pollster gets it. They were given the findings, which appeared to satisfy all concerned, but not the raw data.

This is reminiscent of a struggle within the European Parliamentary Labour Party to get hold of polling data from the Shadow Communications Agency and its director, Philip Gould, that the EPLP had paid for. However, we didn't resort to kidnapping. And what happened to Malloch Brown? He's now Lord Malloch-Brown, one of Gordon Brown's Foreign Office ministers. No more spin, indeed!

*Henry McCubbin*

### **What about Israel?**

**Uri Avnery, edited by Sara R. Powell, *Israel's Vicious Circle: Ten Years of Writings on Israel and Palestine*, Pluto Press, 240 pages, hardback ISBN 9780745328232, £15.99**

Uri Avnery is well known as a peace activist, and a courageous advocate of the rights of the Palestinian people. His time as a Member of Parliament

brought him a wide audience, but he has been an unremitting campaigner inside or outside Parliament. For years he was the only MP demanding negotiations with the Palestinians, and he was the first Israeli to meet with Yasser Arafat.

His essays, sharp and always to the point, speak powerfully of the suppressed aspirations of Palestine. As he says, presently many leaders of the different factions in Palestine are in prison, from Marwan Barghouti, the leader of Fatah in the West Bank, to Sheik Abd-al-Khaliq Al-Natshe, a Hamas leader.

‘With them there are leaders of Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front, and the Democratic Front. They spend their time there in permanent discussion, while keeping constant contact with the leaders of their organisations outside and the activists inside. God knows how they do it.’

As Avnery says, when the leaders of the prisoners speak with one voice, what they say carries a greater moral weight than the statements of any Palestinian institution, including the Presidency, the Parliament and the Government. That is why Avnery and his companions picketed the show trial of Marwan Barghouti carrying posters that said ‘Send Barghouti to the negotiating table and not to prison!’

Mordantly, Avnery points out that the American invasion of Iraq to compel it to desist from the pursuit of nuclear weapons raises the question ‘what about Israel?’

It was, of course, Mordechai Vanunu who told the *Sunday Times* about the Dimona nuclear weapons factory, and exposed the stockpiling of nuclear bombs by Israel. He was subsequently kidnapped, spirited away to Tel Aviv, and locked up for eighteen years, eleven of which he spent in solitary confinement. After he was ‘liberated’, ferocious restrictions were imposed on him. He could not leave Israel, could not leave one particular town, could not approach any Embassy or Consulate, and was forbidden to talk with foreign citizens.

Avnery points out that these rules had been imposed by the colonial British emergency regulations which had been denounced by the Jewish leaders in Palestine as ‘worse than the Nazi laws’.

According to Avnery,

‘In the short address Vanunu was able to make to the media immediately on his release, he made a strong remark: that the young woman who served as bait for his kidnapping, some eighteen years ago, was not a Mossad agent, as generally assumed, but an agent of the FBI or CIA. Why was it so urgent for him to convey this?’

From the first moment, there was something odd about the Vanunu affair.

At the beginning, my first thought was that he was a Mossad agent. Everything pointed in that direction. How else can one explain a simple technician's success in smuggling a camera into the most secret and best-guarded installation in Israel? And in taking photos apparently without hindrance? How else to explain the career of that person who, as a student at Be'er-Sheva University, was well known as belonging to the extreme left and spending his time in the company of Arab fellow students? How was he allowed to leave the country with hundreds of photos? How was he able to approach a British paper and to turn over to British scientists material that convinced them that Israel had 200 nuclear bombs?

Absurd, isn't it? But it all fits, if one assumes that Vanunu acted from the beginning on a mission for the Mossad. His disclosures in the British newspaper not only caused no damage to the Israeli government, but on the contrary, strengthened the Israeli deterrent without committing the government, which was free to deny everything.

What happened next only reinforced this assumption. While in London, in the middle of his campaign of exposures, knowing that half a dozen intelligence services are tracking his every movement, he starts an affair with a strange woman, is seduced into following her to Rome, where he is kidnapped and shipped back to Israel. How naïve can you get? Is it credible for a reasonable person to fall into such a primitive trap? It is not. Meaning that the whole affair was nothing but a classic cover story.

But when the affair went on, and details of the years-long daily mistreatment of the man became public, I had to give up this initial theory. I had to face the fact that our security services are even more stupid than I had assumed (which I wouldn't have believed possible) and that all these things actually had happened, and that Mordecai Vanunu was an honest and idealistic, if extremely naïve, person.

I have no doubt that his personality was shaped by his background. He is the son of a family with many children, who were quite well-to-do in Morocco but lived in a primitive 'transition camp' in Israel before moving to Be'er-Sheva, where they lived in poverty. In spite of this, he succeeded in getting into university and got a Master's degree, quite an achievement, but suffered, so it seems, from the overbearing attitude and prejudices of his Ashkenazi peers. Undoubtedly, that pushed him towards the company of the extreme left, where such prejudices were not prevalent.

The bunch of 'security correspondents' and other commentators who are attached to the udders of the security establishment have already spread stories about Vanunu 'imagining things', his long stay in solitary confinement causing him to 'convince himself of all kinds of fantasies' and to 'invent all kinds of fabrications'. Meaning: the American connection.

Against this background one can suddenly understand all these severe

restrictions, which, at first sight, look absolutely idiotic. The Americans, it seems, are very worried. The Israeli security services have to dance to their tune. The world must be prevented by all available means from hearing, from the lips of a credible witness, that the Americans are full partners in Israel's nuclear arms program, while pretending to be the world's sheriff for the prevention of nuclear proliferation.'

A strange accusation! How far is it true? Had it been made by anybody but Avnery, we would have ignored it. But since he has made it, we owe it to him to publish, and invite responses.

*James Jones*

### **Forgotten Democracy**

**David Roberts, *The European Union and You: Understanding the Constitution, the Reform Treaty and the Arguments*, Saxon Books, 600 pages, hardback ISBN 9780952896944, £24.99**

**Jan Orbie, *Europe's Global Role: External Policies of the European Union*, Ashgate, 232 pages, hardback ISBN 9780754672203, £55**

June 2009 will see the seventh European Union General Election to the European Parliament taking place. If this had been on the timescale of an American Presidential election, our British media would have already subjected us to at least a year of party politics and primaries, and even those who had failed to reach nomination would have become familiar names to the British populace. I doubt if you could find more than a handful of people in the streets here who could tell you when the next European Parliamentary elections take place, let alone name anyone taking part. Although Kilroy Silk's appearance on 'I'm a celebrity' might just prove me wrong.

As someone who has actively participated in European politics, I can only express my exasperation at the disinterested attitude of the media in the United Kingdom, encouraged, I believe, by the major political parties, towards this important political event. With half the resources spent by the BBC on its coverage of the US elections, it could quite easily raise the awareness of our public to the importance of these elections to British citizens who, unlike with the US elections, actually have a vote which can register change in the make up of the European Parliament. It is ironic that it is in Scotland, the part of the United Kingdom in which independence

from the UK, but continued EU membership, is actively being discussed, the BBC produces a programme in Gaelic (with English subtitles) called Eòrpa (Europe), which covers European political, economic, cultural and social affairs. This is the only such main channel programme transmitted in the United Kingdom.

It is not as if information on the topic is in itself hard to come by. The European Union institutions have extensive web sites, as have the political Groups within the European Parliament, often covering the issues in real time. Although the very designation 'group' indicates that these political formations are not 'parties', a title which bestows greater authority. The problem with coverage as it is now presented is that the European Union is portrayed as a series of unconnected events, instead of the political process that it undoubtedly is. Hence, the appearance that new EU legislation drops, as if from outer space, on the laps of unprepared editors. A recent case in point is the working time directive where the supine Labour MEPs broke with the habit of a lifetime and actually voted with the majority in Parliament to force the UK Government into line. This was a major breach in discipline, but received no more than a couple of paragraphs in the broadsheets.

Coming up over the next few months will be the Irish government's response to its people voting against the Lisbon Treaty. I would conjecture that an attempt will be made to tie support for the euro based Irish banks to a Yes vote. Will this impact on the UK? It probably will in that it may remind people that we are, after all, members of the European Union, and that Gordon Brown declared five tests for the UK economy before we could join the euro. The first test concerns whether the UK has achieved 'convergence' with the rest of the European Union. You could certainly posit that our economic cycles were in step as we all descend, like Olympic synchronised divers, into recession; the second, whether there is sufficient economic flexibility in the UK and the EU to avoid problems: with a reserve army of unemployed being created at speed, this test also gets a tick against it; the third test concerns the effects on inward investment; there is hardly any competition for this at this moment as there is none; the fourth test affects those in the City of London, no doubt so busy fearing the EU that they were completely unsighted on the great trough of sub-prime junk IOUs across the Atlantic. Finally, the Chancellor and his economic advisers listed as the 'fifth test' for Britain's entry into the euro the general economic effects of monetary union on the British economy, thus exposing the whole sham as a political exercise all along.

With six months to go until the next European Elections, there has been

the recent publication of two relevant books. The first, *The European Union and You* by David Roberts, which provides a helpful collection of current issues and recent legislation which should form the basis for the political arguments through to next spring. The second is *Europe's Global Role*, edited by Jan Orbie, which covers an aspect of the European Union obscured even more by the member state politicians than issues of sovereignty. As the European Union's importance as a major trader and the home of a major currency grows, the perceived need for co-operation in external affairs, including that of the national militaries, has captured more European Council time and security organisation resources. This has been a highly contentious issue, which the major actors have done their utmost to keep behind closed doors, and assign to obscure committees with acronyms or apparently unrelated geographical titles. The whole objective with Europe's near neighbours has been to 'marketise' their economies, which may in hindsight now look like a wasteful exercise for all concerned. These two books illuminate how this neoliberal drift happened. Why it was allowed to happen will probably be revealed as our media steadfastly looks across the Atlantic, with its back to where the relevant action now is.

Henry McCubbin

### Viva Cuba!

**Dervla Murphy, *The Island that Dared*, Eland Publishing, 320 pages, hardback ISBN 9781906011352, £16.99**

This is a remarkable book by a remarkable woman. Undoubtedly, already well known to the aficionados of travel writing, Dervla Murphy had to defer her back-packing wanderings to her later years, owing to early family caring responsibilities, but by her early 70s had managed to travel extensively. Her travels now encompass Tibet, India, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Madagascar, Southern Africa, the Balkans, Siberia and much of South America. She has written more than 20 titles (her first book dates from 1965, *Ireland to India With a Bicycle*) and was still considering a cycling excursion in Ussuriland in eastern Russia at 71 when a broken knee intervened. As one can see, we are dealing with an intrepid traveller! This book follows her three visits to Cuba in 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively, firstly with her daughter and three grandchildren, but the latter two by herself.

The book is much more, however, than a travel book, largely eschewing

tourist Cuba, in favour of city backwaters, rural areas and towns, but it does contain helpful hints, not least of which is to be aware of the discomforts of train travel in Cuba. The writer is well aware that Cuba, emerging from the 'Special Period', is embracing a new reality fraught with both dangers and opportunities. She makes the contradictions of the present vividly stark: an impoverished economy with a virtually skeletal transport system; inadequate housing, much of it in disrepair; overly bureaucratic administration teetering over into petty corruption. Over the years the American blockade and the Soviet abandonment have exacted a dreadful price. And yet, the revolution has delivered a largely caring people, vibrant without the obvious acquisitive attributes of western societies, with an 'idea of equality . . . who never felt inferior' because they lacked the western world's 'goodies'. The author contrasts this with the 'hungry, ragged, dirty or obviously diseased' she has encountered throughout her travels in the Third World. It is a fact, of course, that Cuba's health system is equal to that of many western countries, and its health education programme has facilitated the export of Cuban doctors throughout the Third World. Fidel has obviously strong feelings about 'graduating as a doctor' as one of the 'noblest actions a human being can do for others', and this ethos has obviously been imparted successfully to the temporary Cuban medical volunteers, few of whom are tempted to lucrative positions in western medicine when being abroad makes this a possibility. The author can boast unwelcome personal experience of the efficacy of Cuban health resources, when she collapsed into delirium with acute sunstroke (*hyperpyrexia*) in a remote Cuban town. She was treated by a local Cuban doctor who arrived within 15 minutes by bicycle.

The author obviously has the personality and the easy humanity to engage with other people, whatever the language or cultural impediments. As a result the book is able to give insight into the thinking of a wide cross-section of Cuban society. These range from the committed *Fidelista* to the disenchanted exiles of Miami, and she made a point of seeking out the views, within Cuba itself, of known dissidents. The book therefore gives a clear indication of the majority bedrock support for the revolution amongst the Cuban population, but this is accompanied by, unfortunately, a relatively extensive disenchantment among many of the young, together with a more generalised irritation with many of the bureaucratic regulations governing some aspects of Cuban society.

The book is a mine of information on Cuban history and the island's difficulties with its overbearing neighbour to the north, all contextually linked within the narrative of the travelogue. The author visits the Santa

Clara memorial to Ché, Playa Giron (the Bay of Pigs) and Fidel's birthplace, as well as wandering through the battlefields of the revolutionary war in the Sierra Maestra. One poignant reminder of this war is mentioned when the author meets an 80 year-old wheelchair veteran of the rebel army in the small town of Manzanillo, who during the uprising remembers twice covertly fetching Ché's asthma medicine from the local doctor's daughter. This day of discussion was the occasion of perhaps too many Buccaneros (Cuban beer) and too much sun resulting in, as mentioned above, the need for speedy medical attention!

The book is short on hard economic facts (a travel book is perhaps not quite the right vehicle anyway), but there is some discussion of Cuban agriculture and the turn away from the approach of Soviet agriculture, led initially by Fidel. This is before the Soviet collapse and the commencement of the Special Period. Cuba was to move subsequently to a more balanced, ecologically-guided farming including the adoption of town allotments on a mass scale, using often previously derelict land. Cuba is highly dependent on food imports, a situation she is striving to combat. The present economic climate has been greatly helped by the support of Chavez and, in particular, Venezuelan oil, and hopefully to be further aided by the discovery, recently, of large oil deposits off the coast of Cuba, thus easing the island's dependency on tourism.

The final part of the book is taken up with observations about Cuba's central dilemma: namely the rate and form of its accommodation with the Market, and the political and economic changes this may engender. As to the democratic nature of Cuban society, the book has some detailed reflections on the positive aspects of local municipal elections, and places democracy at the national level in the context of South American attitudes to revolution, differing as it does from western conceptions of revolutionary violence. Certainly, Cuba still needs to be able to defend herself against the economic blockade and the machinations of violent exile groups payrolled by the CIA/FBI. In fact the book mentions the many assassination attempts, terrorist activities and infiltrations, ceaseless negative propaganda and defamation, even the possible use of biological warfare, all directed against Cuba. The sense of siege hardly assists the democratic process.

Having said all this, it would be timely to note the words of the Cuban philosopher and polymath Antonio Blanco: 'If it is possible to "reinvent" socialism anywhere, then the conditions for doing so exist on this island'.

*The Island that Dared* is a truly Caribbean treasure trove, successful at every level: from feeling the pulse of the Cuban psyche, to understanding

the everyday problems confronted by its ordinary citizens, to learning about Cuba's history, appreciating the political and economic problems it faces and, as a tourist guide, to getting around the country (not an easy business) and seeing some of the sights. Dervla Murphy's book is a magnificent act of solidarity with a country threatened by powerful outside forces, which would very much like to see the final snuffing out of any lingering alternative to globalised capitalism. Let us hope they are unsuccessful!

*John Daniels*

### **On Bardsey Island**

**Fflur Dafydd, *Twenty Thousand Saints*, Alcemi, 252 pages, paperback, ISBN 9780955527227, £9.99**

Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli) lies about two miles off the tip of the Llŷn Peninsula in North Wales. Day-trippers are welcome during the summer months, but are warned to be careful, as islands can be dangerous. So says the official Bardsey website, and the warning is echoed by Fflur Dafydd in her beautifully composed novel, *Twenty Thousand Saints*.

It is summer and the Island has opened itself up to visitors once more. The first to arrive is a filmmaker, Leri, and her companion Greta. Next is Mererid, the writer-in-residence, who, after missing the early morning boat, finally makes it ashore. The last to appear is the sinister Iestyn. Already living on Bardsey are a silent nun, Sister Vivian, a forlorn archaeologist named Deian, and Elin, a sensual woman whom all seem to admire. Accompanying each of them are their secrets – their darkest secrets, which the Island itself intends to out.

Mischief and madness are found in all the places on the small, secluded Bardsey Island of this novel. Fflur Dafydd's poetic narrative breathes life into her carefully constructed characters. Each one of them shares all with the reader, but nothing with each other, reflecting both the vast expanse of nature, and their compact community on Bardsey. They all have their own space, but each is confined.

Although a little slow in picking up momentum, Dafydd's story unearths each character's hidden secret, and compels the reader to dig deeper. *Twenty Thousands Saints* is a dark, comedic thriller that explores intense bonds between people and their loved ones. It is a gripping read.

*Abi Rhodes*