

Reviews

Mouldering the break

Keith Laybourn, *A Century of Labour*, Sutton Publishing, 184pp. £20

Professor Laybourn has prepared this little book to celebrate the centenary of the formation of the Labour Representation Committee. It ‘records the rise, fall and rise of the Party’. In a nutshell, this centenary commemoration therefore reflects the official picture of Labour through the twentieth century. Unfortunately, this picture cramps the real history into a distorting mould, in which original events can only be recognised with difficulty. Paradoxically, the distortions are fewer in the most distant times recorded, and intensify as we approach modern times.

In his first pages, Laybourn pays attention to the social tumults upon which Labour had to impress its stamp. No-one will be surprised by his remarks on the upsurge of new unionism, or on the response to the First World War, with the formation of the War Emergency Committee. His account of the response to the enfranchisement of women, and the recruitment of more than 100,000 women to Labour Women’s Sections, supports an analysis usefully, but does not top it out.

But two shaping influences are missed in this account. The First World War provoked economic responses by organised labour about which my colleagues and I have written at length elsewhere. But it also provoked a profound moral outrage, which made a powerful contribution to the undermining of the Liberal Party. The Liberal leaders were held personally culpable for launching into the war, by all the Liberal pacifists who opposed it. Yes, these were a small minority of the population. But they had great purchase on the Liberal conscience, and their influence explains much of the political movement which puts Laybourn at a loss, in his attempt to understand the inter-war years. The significant drift of prominent Liberals over to Labour owed a great deal to pacifist sentiment, which grew stronger after the war came to an end, and the truth about its horrors began to emerge.

Secondly, for one so much preoccupied by Parliamentary institutions, in the later part of his account, Laybourn is strangely uninterested in the *coup d’état* which made Ramsay Macdonald the ‘Leader’ of the Labour Party. Previously the spokesperson of the Party was the Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and the constitution defined no role for a ‘Leader’. When Macdonald led his ILP contingent to the constitutive meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party after the General Election of 1922, and deposed the existing Chairman, J.R. Clynes, the phrase ‘Chairman and Leader’ entered official press releases for the first time. Soon afterwards, ‘Chairman’ was out, and ‘Leader’ was firmly in. This was not simply a verbal tic. Far from it. Macdonald’s *coup* amounted to the imposition of the doctrine of *primus inter pares* on the Labour Party, so that when, shortly afterwards, the first Labour Government was formed, Macdonald could follow

the constitutional position, as amorphously evolved, and designate the members of his Cabinet without consultation with the Parliamentary Labour Party. He could also change his Cabinets according to his taste.

This device had been specifically opposed during ILP conferences, in debates which raged before and during the First World War. The conventional social democratic approach had always been based on the assumption that all the Parliamentarians would choose not only their senior spokesmen, but the collective leadership which went with it.

This assumption lived on in the Labour Party after MacDonald's subsequent defection, and Attlee betrayed his unease about it, even towards the end of his last administration. Yet nowadays these arguments have disappeared from view, and the vast majority of academic analysts, never mind about Labour Party members, presume that the present system of Prime Ministerial patronage is the only one possible, and indeed the only one conceivable.

But it is when Laybourn arrives at the Wilson/Callaghan administration, and its crisis, that we receive a completely jaundiced view of Labour history, fully in conformity with current orthodoxy. Disruptive unilateralism was alleged to enfeeble popular support for the Labour Party, from 1960 onwards. By 1979, Laybourn perceives it as a self-evident abandonment of common sense. The truth is that during all this time, the opinion polls moved up and down, but showed steady concern with and indeed revulsion from the reliance on nuclear deterrence. If people then had known of what we know now about the danger involved, the opposition might well have been very much stronger. It was already quite overwhelming.

But the real problem recognised by the Labour Government in the period before 1979 was that its economic model had broken down, and that it therefore found itself involved in ever more open conflict with its own supporters. Laybourn looks at the sad evolution of unemployment, and the undermining of the welfare state, with reasonable objectivity. And yet he concludes that the problem was the reluctance of the Labour Party to adapt to the changing nature of British society. The reality was quite different. To adapt to higher unemployment by accepting it was to remove the space for a Labour Party. The Conservatives could accept it more eagerly, and pursue it more systematically. To adapt to encroachments on the principles of the welfare state was also completely self-defeating.

If the only conclusion to be drawn from the severe inflationary crisis leading up to 1979 and Thatcher's victory was that full employment and the post-war welfare settlement were no longer sustainable, then indeed Thatcher was inevitable. But Laybourn does not answer the resultant questions. Who on the Labour side was willing to embrace the Thatcher alternative? Not even the breakaway Social Democrats could candidly admit to such radicalism. Certainly none of those who stayed within the Labour Party thought of Thatcherism as anything other than ferocious reaction.

Laybourn is very magisterial about the failures of the 1974 Wilson

administration. But he has no positive suggestions to make about non-Thatcherite alternatives. He seems to give his approval to Kaufmann's characterisation of Labour's 1983 Manifesto as 'the longest suicide note in history'. But at this point he abandons any interest in the actual historical record. Those who agreed with Kaufmann at the time sang pianissimo, and most Labour people rejected that message. Why?

Far from offering consistent revisionism in a sustained bid to save the Labour Party from dogmatism, Neil Kinnock began his leadership, and sustained it for some considerable time, as the voice of ancient orthodoxy. When asked by Eric Hobsbawm how to deal with Labour's lack of an ideology, he denied that there was any such lack. 'We have Clause IV, and that is our ideology' was his reply.

For Laybourn, this period of Labour history is completely reconstituted in the light of Blairite orthodoxy. But the realities of the early '80s show us Neil Kinnock as a firm partisan of Clause IV, and Tony Blair as a neophyte nuclear disarmament and communicant with *Marxism Today*. Both, of course, were moving inexorably to the right: but neither was engaging with the deep-seated problems of elaborating a practicable alternative to Thatcherism. The more that they engaged the Thatcher project, the more, in fact, they succumbed to it. Laybourn denounced the strong commitment to unilateral disarmament as an 'unpopular policy'.

In fact, the 1982 commitment was in important respects quite different from the earlier engagement at the beginning of the '60s. The mobilising argument in the '80s, was that of European Nuclear Disarmament, which sought to create a nuclear-free zone in all of Europe 'from Poland to Portugal'. Most European Social Democratic Parties were firmly committed to this project, and joined in the European Liaison Committee which organised the European Nuclear Disarmament Conventions from 1982 onwards. Only the French and Italian Socialists stood apart, from their continental colleagues, and powerful input to the European process came from the German, Dutch, Swedish and Spanish Socialist Parties. The Labour Party was also officially represented throughout the process.

As with nuclear disarmament so with most of the burning social issues, a plausible policy depended upon the creation of a European alliance of socialist, social democratic and left political forces. The failure to embrace this cause was the weakness of the Labour Party left, but this was not simply a left-wing disorder.

Of course, the European left did not embody a focus of clear political strategy. Far from it. But the burning issues of employment, public enterprise and response to multinational economic power were common to all the European Parties, who were jointly sensible to the evolution of European responses. Unfortunately the British, Left and Right, were largely absent from this process. Exceptionally the work of Stuart Holland in the project *Out of Crisis*, and subsequent initiatives, made a real contribution to European thinking. None of this is mentioned by Laybourn, because he is completely incurious about such matters.

However, alternatives are still needed, even if they have been imperfectly

developed and tell us more about what will not do, than what will. The truth is that the Blair ascendancy was simply the Thatcher lizard shedding its skin, and that in all essentials, Tony Blair is the continuator of Thatcherite policies on the economy and social affairs.

The neo-liberal regime is profoundly unsatisfactory for a very large majority of people who live in Britain. It survives because of a temporary economic boom which leaves out a very substantial part of the population. But Blair continues the same fundamental weakening of the British productive economy that so resolutely marked the Thatcher years. The British balance of payments crisis would become quite frightening, if any sudden slump or downturn were to be imagined. The Blair political bubble may burst before the underlying Thatcher economic bubble, because arbitrary and arrogant politics are not popular even when people are relatively comfortable. But in all probability both bubbles will burst, and it is even possible that both could burst at once.

At this point, Laybourn's book will be an interesting pointer for scholars. It will show how purblind historians can become, if they pay too careful attention to the whims of those in power. That Blair has solved none of the problems he inherited is all-too-clear. The search for solutions will have to be resumed: but by whom? New Labour has succeeded in disabling many who might have tried.

Ken Coates

Spin doctors unspun

Norman Fairclough, *New Labour, New Language?*, Routledge, 2000, £35 cloth/£9.99 paper, pp.178

Professor Fairclough of Lancaster University has produced a brilliant new book which examines in precise detail the way in which Mr Blair and his spin doctors have surreptitiously created a new language to promote their policies as a new 'Third Way' in politics. The first secret is never to mention certain words and phrases – capitalists or transnational companies, socialism or socialist values, class or status, equality or inequality, revisions or cut backs. In their place the alternative words are respectively business, shared or traditional values, our people or the nation, inclusion/exclusion, modernisation or reforms. The second secret is to slide from one meaning to the other in the use of the first person plural to establish a positive association – thus 'we' and 'our' may refer to the Party leadership, the Party, business, the nation or even the leading nations. The third is to use abstractions – 'change sweeps the world' – and the passive voice to describe events so as not to mention the agency – thus opinion is formed, decisions are reached, goods are made, capital is moved, technology is found.

The fourth moves us into an important area of language, in what Fairclough calls the 'collocations' or co-occurrences of words. Of course everything is

'new' – New Labour, New Britain, New Europe, new ways, new approaches, new ideas; and 'our' values are always 'shared' or 'traditional'. The Third Way is always a 'modernised' social democracy, the centre left is 'flexible', 'innovative' and 'forward-looking'. More important, verbs are used quite carefully where anything like a promise is being made, which could be checked up on, or it is necessary to make it clear that it is not a process which is being discussed but a condition. Thus poverty is to be 'tackled' or 'reduced', not 'prevented'. 'Combating' social exclusion might imply either alleviation or prevention, but the context always makes it clear that it is the former. When world poverty is being referred to quite strong words are used like 'eradicating'; the British government could not be held to be solely responsible. These collocations are not examined for their consistency. Connected with this there is a tendency to make lists of things that are happening, especially of changes, to suggest that they are associated and equivalent without examining or explaining how or why, while implying a certain inevitability. This is the essence of lists and 'bullet points' that their cumulative power supplies its own logic.

A whole sentence is quoted by Fairclough from a speech by Blair to the Confederation of British Industry (27.05.98), in what he calls a 'cascade of change' with only the 'logic of appearances':

'We all know this is a world of dramatic change. In technology; in trade; in media and communications; in the new global economy refashioning our industries and capital markets; in family structure; in communities; in life styles.'

There is no explanation of how these might be related, but the list is employed to give support to the particular changes being proposed.

A fifth use of words is to combine antitheses, especially those normally part of the opposing discourses of the Left and the Right, without indicating how they might be reconciled or what weight is to be given to each. Blair's first famous sound-bite 'Tough on crime and on the causes of crime' comes into this category. Everything depends on how tough the government is in each case. A long quotation is taken by Fairclough from Blair's Fabian pamphlet on the Third Way which begins: 'My vision for the 21st. century', Blair writes, 'is of a popular politics reconciling themes which in the past have wrongly been regarded as antagonistic – patriotism and internationalism, rights and responsibilities, the promotion of enterprise and the attack on poverty and discrimination'.

Examples are then given; 'Cutting corporation tax *and* introducing a minimum wage'; 'New investment and reforms in our schools . . . *and* cracking down hard on juvenile crime'; 'Reforming central government . . . *and* devolving power . . .'. 'Significant extra resources into priority areas such as health and education *and* tough and prudent limits on overall government spending'.

Some of these can be reconciled, as Fairclough argues, by a careful balancing act, but Blair's claim, echoing his guru Anthony Giddens, is that New Labour 'goes beyond Left and Right'. There must be a conflict between free enterprise and the attack on poverty, between extra resources and limits on government

spending. To try to pretend otherwise is a rhetorical device designed to stop questions being asked about the how and where.

The worst misuse of language in New Labour's vocabulary lies in the continuing suggestion by Blair and his associates that they are engaging in a dialogue or at the very least in a process of consultation, when they are in fact expounding if not actually exhorting. Fairclough takes the example of the Welfare Reform Green Paper of March 1998, to which he devotes the best part of a whole chapter. He first distinguishes five conditions that would have to be fulfilled to make for a substantive dialogue:

1. People decide to come together and can come back together;
2. Access is open to which ever sections of society want to join in – there is “equality of opportunity” to join and contribute;
3. People are free to disagree and their differences are recognised;
4. There is space for consensus to be reached, and alliances to be formed, but no guarantees;
5. It is talk which makes a difference – it leads to action (e.g. policy change).’

Fairclough shows that not one of these conditions is met by the reliance of New Labour on focus groups and by its use of web sites. Although there may be disagreements in these, they are not necessarily recognised and, while consensus may be reached, like all the talk it is meaningless because the action takes place elsewhere. Alternative alliances are ruled out by the nature of the exercise.

Welfare reform was such a big issue, involving what Blair called a ‘change in culture’, that it required a major campaign. A Green Paper was published with the announcement that this was the beginning of a great debate and the Prime Minister himself would tour the country on a ‘welfare roadshow’ to explain personally why reform was needed. At the same time, articles by Mr Blair appeared in *The Times* and the *Mirror* quoting from Focus Files prepared by the Department of Social Security for the Green Paper which warned that ‘benefit fraud was costing the country £4 billion a year, enough to build one hundred new hospitals’. In the Green Paper itself there is a subtle mixture of informing and persuading, ‘telling and selling’ the central story that the Government’s aim is to move the whole emphasis from welfare to work. The reader is sometimes asked whether he or she agrees, but no alternatives are offered and the meaning of work is not explored – part-time/full time, voluntary/casual, paid/unpaid, home work/ housework.

Throughout the Green Paper the issue is presented as a problem to be managed, and primarily as a problem between government and claimants. As Fairclough comments: ‘Welfare staff feature very little, claimants’ organisations and campaign groups hardly at all, and welfare professionals and experts never’. There is no attempt to discuss the ‘cultural change’ that is in effect being promoted, but it is clear enough in the absence of words like ‘helping’ and ‘caring’ and ‘citizens’ and the substitution of the following in a quotation extracted by Fairclough: ““personalised”, “flexible” services are “delivered” through a single “gateway” for “customers” by “personal advisers” who develop “tailor-made action plans” for individuals.’

When the Welfare Reform Bill was published, Blair wrote for the *Daily Mail* an article under the headline: 'It really is the end of the something for nothing days' and the *Mail* rubbed it in with its own comment that 'Tony Blair cracks down on the benefit culture'.

It is not Fairclough's intention to examine the gap between rhetoric and reality in New Labour's statements, although he often points to its existence, in the claim to 'reject the excesses of the market [without] the intrusive hand of state intervention', in the 'partnership' of private and public sectors in pensions or in hospital and rail finance that turns out to involve the public paying and the private investor gaining, in the grand promises about a Freedom of Information Bill and the mouse that emerged, in the 'just and moral cause' for which the bombing of Yugoslavia was recommended and the economic and strategic interests underlying NATO intervention. Spelling out in detail the width of these gaps between rhetoric and reality is, of course, an important task but what Fairclough has revealed for us is not less important. This is that language in politics today is part of the action.

Michael Barratt Brown

New Labour's laboratory

Tom Nairn, *After Britain*, Granta, 2000, £15.99

Tom Nairn has once again entered the debate on Scotland's position in the world, this time with the benefit of the experience of the first years of the Blair administration and the formation of the Scottish Parliament.

The terrain is a familiar one to those who walk and climb over Scotland's mountains. Always the next rise will reveal the summit. Sure the view improves with each plateau achieved, but do not stop to admire it too long before attacking the next stage, as our geography ensures that visibility is a scarce commodity.

Nairn sets about attacking the concepts of 'the settled will of the Scottish people' and allowing the new arrangement to settle down. This is at heart the ongoing argument in Scotland over devolution as a process or an event. But, inimitably, Nairn not only airs the grand political arguments but also exposes the fetid nature of a new political elite on the make and fighting, through the encouragement of inertia, to consolidate their gains. Allowing things to settle down in order to make a success of devolution, according to Tom, means avoiding extinction by further constitutional change.

A far greater flaw in the devolutionary process is that it has been promoted by the United Kingdom's ruling elite as a way of doing next to nothing about the one question that mattered absolutely – that of reforming the British Constitution. However, Blair has reformed just enough to destabilise everything, and to make reconsolidation of British sovereignty impossible. Nairn points to a little advertised fact that the Scottish Parliament reconvened without a new constitution to enact. To illustrate the instability inherent in this situation, Tom

quotes Rafael Samuel in that, as a source of symbolic capital, Britain's credit seems to be exhausted, and reflects that this is because the centre has altered the periphery without redesigning itself.

But along with the constitutional debate in *After Britain* readers are provided with an excoriating yet entertaining account of 'that which no irony can be misplaced and satire grows daily redundant – Blairism'. It is at bottom last ditch Britishness. Saving Ukania from demented economists, fake Americanisers and astrological misreadings of Adam Smith. The idea-free inheritor of the British state, composing modernity on the hoof and providing the public with post modern circus acts. Blairism is a new sales drive for Thatcherism.

Policy formation in the Brave New World of New Labour is portrayed by Nairn as being a blank horizon with the route charted towards it by means of 'thinktankery, the synthesis of scenarios, gameplans and spiffing ideas constantly fuelled by the dizzying sensation of guiding those up on the bridge'. The effect of all this on the Scottish body politic is where Nairn is at his most perceptive. Blair's supporters in Scotland, daily reducing to the beneficiaries of the Party's powers of patronage through its selection procedures and ability to appoint to the 'reformed' House of Lords and Scotland's burgeoning Quangocracy, see no irony in him coming to Edinburgh to thank the Scottish people for their support in giving them their own parliament! So grand a sight could not have graced Edinburgh since George IV visited Edinburgh to thank the clan chiefs, although Blair at least declined to wear the regal tartan and pink hose sported on that occasion.

But, as Nairn has detected, the psychic mysteries of the British Crown State and British Socialism went down together, not altogether accidentally, and by 1998 had become heritage sites. This has no small effect on Scotland. Scotland has become New Labour's laboratory. Once socialism had been expunged the Lib/Dem alliance could go ahead. Labour's followers are still to come out from under the effects of the 'third way chloroform'. When they do they will be in for a shock. Devolution has not killed nationalism stone dead, as Lord George Robertson of NATO once predicted.

To the contrary, nationalism, which would never deliver socialism to Scotland, is still alive and kicking. It is New Labour which has made it its mission never to deliver socialism, whether to Scotland or any other part of the UK. With middle England, New Labour no longer wants or, it thinks, needs Scottish Labour, with its belief that it is the custodian of socialism for the British party. It certainly does not want to listen to sermons about moral backsliding. 'Should we not leave them alone?' asks Tom Nairn.

The effect of *After Britain* has recently spread to the United States. No less a figure than Francis Fukuyama fears a Scottish break away that would reduce Britain's already shrunken influence. He cites, in the *Sunday Herald*, Britain's help to the great transatlantic hegemony during the Gulf War and the ongoing Kosovo crisis, and how the UK has helped to keep Nato's nuclear alliance together, citing the former US base on the Holy Loch in Scotland which he,

erroneously, still believes is operational. It must have passed him by, along with history, that the Scottish people have been opposed to the presence of nuclear weapons on their soil, whether American or British. Fukuyama proclaims this from the standpoint of American interests. I take this to mean continued global domination. Americans should support what Blair is doing i.e. keeping the UK as a union, and that Nairn's position is ridiculous.

My thanks to Francis Fukuyama for providing me with compelling evidence to support one more argument in favour of Tom's position.

Henry McCubbin

Close partnership

Royden J. Harrison, *The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. 1858-1905, The Formative Years*, Macmillan, 2000, pp.397, £50

This brilliant first volume of the authorised biography of the Webbs appears at a most appropriate historic moment. Labour leaders have been (very quietly) celebrating the centenary of the old Labour Party, whose founding the Webbs did much to inspire, and an independent Labour candidate has become the mayor of London, whose local government the Webbs did much to create. We must not exaggerate. Harrison's *Life and Times* reminds us that it was the Labour Representation Committee that was established in 1900 (the Labour Party came 6 years later), and that in fact the Webbs did not attend or contribute directly to its formation, and Sidney represented the Progressive Party on the London County Council during his tenure from 1892 to 1904. For many years, indeed, they ignored the Labour Party, although they were its true creators.

There have been many books about the Webbs, and most particularly about Beatrice, her letters and four volumes of her diaries, as well as her own autobiographical *My Apprenticeship*. This is the first to weave together the personal development of a partnership between this remarkable couple and the ideas that they channelled into the creation of a peculiarly English socialism. Describing the formation of this partnership, Harrison examines their complementarity – not only Beatrice's social connections and Sidney's experience of government, her originality and his application, but also her 'feeling for the quality of provincial working class life' and its cooperative institutions and his immersion in socialist societies and London labour politics. And Harrison emphasises the keen awareness of each of them of what they lacked and could make good:

'Sidney and Beatrice discovered their personal need for each other while they were in the process of redefining the labour movement. This was indeed what they were doing. The dynamic, institutional, tripartite conception of the world of labour was at once their discovery and their programme' ('tripartite' because it combined the trade unions, the cooperatives and the socialist societies).

This volume ends before the Labour Party adopted its commitment to socialism with the famous Clause 4 of the 1918 Constitution, which Sidney was largely responsible for drafting, and which New Labour has abandoned. It must seem ancient history to many young people today. But it recreates for us in the most exciting way the rich mix of ideas fermenting at the end of the Nineteenth Century, from which English socialism was brewed, and which are still floating around at the centre of our contemporary concerns. Indeed, Harrison has written a history that is on every page as much a judgement of our own times as of those of Sidney and Beatrice Webb a hundred years ago.

I am saying English socialism, not just British, because the ideas developed by the Webbs came primarily from English thinkers, quite specifically London based, however great the subsequent contribution to the Labour Party of the Scots, Welsh and Irish, and despite the influence of continental socialists. Just to list the thinkers with whom the Webbs were exchanging ideas is to reveal the rich vein from which the Labour Party was built (and the awesome poverty of thought of New Labour) – from an earlier generation, their teachers, John Stuart Mill, T.H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer, the Positivists, E.S. Beesley and Frederick Harrison, and Charles Booth and William Morris; from their own generation Bertrand Russell, H.G. Wells, Annie Besant, Eleanor Marx and two English residents of long-standing, Bernard Shaw and Friedrich Engels, not to mention many less well-known but important contributors, Sydney Olivier, Graham Wallas, Edward Pease and Emily Davidson. If we add Tom Mann we recognise Beatrice's crucially important links with the unions. These men and women were not all Fabians, they were not all socialists, most of them did not support the ILP (Independent Labour Party) or the (Marxist) Social Democratic Federation and they were divided in the degree to which they would compromise even tactically with the Liberals. But they had certain ideas in common.

The making of Labour

What were these ideas? We can start with the very idea of an intellectual class, what we now dismiss as the 'chattering classes'. For most of the Nineteenth Century this simply did not exist. There were the aristocratic families and the *haute bourgeoisie*, from which Beatrice derived her arrogant snobbery, there were the lesser ranks of the *petits bourgeois*, which gave Sidney his complex of inferiority and ambition, and there were the working classes, only just becoming organised in the 'new unions' at a level below the old craft-based trades unions. Much of the political thought which distinguished the Webbs was their response to the demand of the new unions for a party of labour and for state protection and intervention, in place of the liberal *laissez-faire* which the old unions had embraced. The Fabians with whom they worked were the heirs, Harrison insists, of a tradition stretching back in the Nineteenth Century to the philosophical radicals, the Benthamites, and of the Positivists, Comte and in England Frederick Harrison. It was they who had posed the challenge of collectivism to the prevailing individualism of liberal thought. The social inequalities and the

exploitation of labour that capitalist industrialisation involved, and which made the Fabians into socialists, was not to be ended, however, as Marx supposed, by mounting class struggle but by a 'growing consensus which was already emerging around going institutional concerns'. This is how Harrison puts it.

What the Webbs provided for the Fabians was the detailed study and profession of faith in those institutions, very specifically the trade unions, the consumer cooperatives and local government. These formed the basis of their socialism and in the event the basis of the Labour Party's constitution. Harrison's insight into the connection between the Webb's historical studies and their socialism reveals their great strength, that they supplied what he calls the '*axiomata media*, the propositions that connect the fundamental principles to the particular project' for a new political party. These Webb explained were axioms such as

'To raise compulsorily the Standard of Life; to enforce a National Minimum in each important point; Collective regulation of all matters of common concern, and so on . . .'

These would be the concern of the trade unions, the cooperatives and of municipal socialism. We can judge the abandonment of the collective principle by New Labour today in its embrace of individualism, precisely by its marginalisation of the unions, the cooperatives and local government. Where 'there is no such thing as society', there remains only the central state.

The Webb's two greatest works, the *History of Trade Unionism* and its sequel *Industrial Democracy*, remain, in Harrison's view, unchallenged achievements in the field of labour history; but they were also pioneering works of political theory which reinterpreted the relationship between socialism and the labour movement and opened up the way for a new party of labour. The Webbs, however, as Harrison so eloquently describes it, saw themselves doing much more than that: in effect establishing a new political economy that would challenge Adam Smith and marginalise Karl Marx, and make a new map of learning that would assimilate the social to the natural sciences. They did not succeed in this ambition. As Harrison sums up;

'They created a new school of economics and political science, not a new political economy. In consequence, their theory of the labour movement became excessively institutional and they failed to supply a theory of economic growth and social accounting adequate to their vision of the social democracy of the future.'

The reasons for failure have remained with the labour movement ever since, and are more than ever relevant today. The Webbs rejected Marx's labour theory of value, because it failed to recognise in general the importance of scarcity and in particular the importance of scarce abilities. Marx, they believed, ignored the claim to a 'rent of ability', which was due to the class of owner/managers and professional experts to which they themselves and many of their colleagues belonged. This rejection left them with no theory of capitalist crisis and slump and with heavy dependence on industrial efficiency, and in particular on labour

productivity, for raising the level of wages. Trade unions provided them with their model of democracy for reconciling administrative efficiency with popular control – ‘the power that would change the world’, but the unions could not manage the economy. Owners could be dispensed with in time, by encroachment, but managers were essential and must be free to make decisions subject only to the general benefit of the whole community.

A new map of learning

The Webbs were not only, or even primarily, concerned with political economy any more than were the Fabians. The ‘new map of learning’ was not about music or the arts – the Webbs were surprisingly uninterested in either despite their close relationship to Shaw, but they were interested in what Harrison refers to as the ‘third culture’. They rejected the classical, literary and aristocratic culture of Oxbridge and welcomed the response in provincial bourgeois culture of an emphasis on the natural sciences. Not for nothing had Beatrice been tutored by Herbert Spencer and had known T.H. Huxley as her father’s friend. Russell and Wells were Sidney’s friends. Yet, Harrison rightly complains that, though most creditably, ‘history was extended to allow for the annals of toil’, the Webbs failed to build a ‘third culture’ into the institution they created. He sees this in part as being due to an absence of political resources and regrets that when these became more available in the 1900s, ‘the experience of Ruskin College suggested how difficult it was for the third culture to emulate the second.’

It is a pity that Harrison with his long experience of working class education did not enlarge on this. Ruskin, despite the revolt in 1908, continued to try to give a liberal education to trade unionists. It had to wait until the 1960s to have the resources from Labour and Conservative governments to give them a trade union education. By the 1980s Ruskin was receiving a grant from the Passfield Trust, but what the Webbs would have thought of that is unclear. Shaw thought that good working class activists should be kept away from Oxford at all costs. The Webbs would surely have been pleased at the professionalism of the trade unions that was engendered by the educational opportunities provided by Ruskin and its sister colleges, by the extra-mural departments and the WEA.

Harrison makes it clear that the Webbs really did believe in widening access to education, at least for the lower middle class and skilled working class. Industrial democracy was not just a rhetorical phrase. The key to the future lay in the creation of political and economic institutions which would enable management to be democratic and, to this end, educational institutions which would enable men and women to exercise their democratic rights. It was the common preoccupation of that great army of talented men and women, listed above, who surrounded the Webbs, in and out of the Fabian Society, as to how the new message of the natural and social sciences might be spread among the people. Without television and radio, they devoted an enormous amount of their time to lecturing to the thousands of small societies that would give them a hearing. Sidney’s successes through the Fabian art of permeation in his work on

the London County Council for widening educational opportunity in London, not only in the creation of the London School of Economics but in the Education Acts, makes one of the most telling chapters in Harrison's book.

By contrast, in the following chapter Harrison compares the 'squalid opportunism' of the Fabians' accommodation to imperialism with the 'heroic opportunism' of Sidney's commitment to education. The Webbs did not have the faith of William Morris in public demonstration and early human regeneration. Being practical people wishing to see results for their efforts, and not having the resources of a new Party, they relied upon the entertainment at private dinner parties of Ministers and even Prime Ministers, and this meant not just keeping quiet about the wealth of empire, but in company with Beatrice's one-time suitor and life-long alter ego, Joseph Chamberlain, seeing it as the foundation for social reform. The Webbs' most eminent dining club at the beginning of the century, the Coefficients, was composed of all the leading imperialists of the day, Liberals almost to a man. Russell left them when he found what was going on, and Beatrice was later to deny that she ever was an imperialist. Harrison is not inclined to let the Webbs off lightly for this truancy.

How much this all reminds us of the miserable compromises of New Labour! Cosying up to the imperialists sounds just like the new claims for Labour as the 'party of business'. 'Registering, inspecting and regulating' the industrial functions of private business, as recommended in the Fabian Essays of 1888, rather than suppressing them, is little different from the rhetoric of New Labour, except that the Fabians allowed that the capitalist be 'eventually superseded by the community; and in the meantime he is compelled to cede for public purposes an ever increasing share of rent and interest'. Not by Gordon Brown, he isn't! The question whether capitalism can be moralised, as the Webbs at first believed, is still being argued. The Fabian policy of the 'permeation' of other parties besides Labour, and especially of the Liberals, seems very similar to the Centre/Left/Right alliances being promoted today. Beatrice's castigation of the mendicant and scrounging element in the docks, important as it was in her day as an argument for differentiating the current view of a mass of 'human refuse' in London's East End, reminds one at once of the present harassment of those who claim disability payments, without the same justification

What has changed? – the strength of the unions, if they would only use it; the proportion of educated citizens, if they would only ask the questions that the Webbs dared to ask; the standard of living of the better off workers, but with continuing wide inequalities. What is above all the same is the fundamental question about efficiency and equality. The Webbs did not have an answer with an alternative political economy for the trade unions seeking to carry their tradition of cooperation and democracy not only into the institutions of the state, but more particularly into the work place itself. Industrial democracy, not just the book but the whole conception, remains the enigma today as it was over a hundred years ago, and those who are still concerned with the problem could do no better than return to reading what the Webbs wrote.

The partnership

No review of this book would be complete if it did not say something about the sensitive way in which Harrison has drawn the making and the maintaining of the truly loving relationship between Beatrice and Sidney. Beatrice abhorred the feminists but was a true feminist. All her sisters made ‘good marriages’ and she had the chance to make the best of them all – with Joseph Chamberlain – but his firm ‘NO!’ to her question, whether he allowed the expression of different opinions from his in his household, ended that. For a beautiful, sexually alive and well endowed young lady in the 1880s to put her independence before her marital prospects was almost unknown and in this case she was and remained for long deeply in love with Chamberlain. Coming to terms with Sidney Webb was another matter. Sidney at one point claimed that at least they came from the ‘same class’, meaning for him the professional middle class. For Beatrice this was preposterous. She had a private income and he did not. She had to be accepted for what she was, and in their work together she had to be recognised at least as an equal, not at all the lesser vessel.

Harrison ends this volume with a chapter entitled ‘An Ideal Marriage?’ and despite the question gives it a high mark. They had no children; it would have interfered with their work. The marriage was seen by many, even by Beatrice, as a business relationship, but in the midst of their work together she could record that they ‘allowed half an hour for confidential talk and ‘human nature’ and then worked hard at the Ironfounders’ Records. Then lunch, cigarettes, a little more ‘human nature’, and then another two hours of work.’

This was to her diary in 1891 before their marriage and a year later she could write:

‘We love each other devotedly. We are interested in the same work. We have freedom and means to devote our whole lives to the work we believe in. Never did I imagine such happiness open to me. May I deserve it.’

And Sidney asked:

‘Can’t you be a little haughty or imperious and exacting for a change? I have a sense – delightful – of getting deeper and deeper into your debt.’

By this time Beatrice was behaving like a wife and worrying that Sidney was changing from flannel to cotton night shirts, and catching colds. One has to ask who was making the concessions. Harrison argues convincingly that there were two Beatrices – ‘the ego that confirmed and the ego that denied’, as she herself spoke of her ‘religious agnosticism’. Sidney regarded her praying as neurotic, but it was essential like her diary writing in keeping the two halves of her personality together – the emotional and the rational. One reads this with a sense that it is true of oneself, but fortunately not on the scale experienced by such an extraordinarily imaginative and creative person.

At £50 this book is expensive, but it is essential reading for anyone active or interested in labour politics, past, present or future and equally for any one

concerned to understand better the human relations in a close partnership between a woman and a man. Harrison's writing is masterly, without being heavy, his comment is always profound and often very witty. The book is only marred by the large number of typos, which the author in his illness has been unable to correct. We wait expectantly for the second volume which is promised in the not too distant future. We can hardly wait to read of that break with the Liberals, by which the Webbs created a socialist Labour Party, a break which New Labour is pathetically, and quite disastrously, now seeking to repair.

Michael Barratt Brown

Needham's new Millennium

Joseph Needham: *Science and Civilisation in China*. Volume V: 13 by Peter J. Golas. Part xiii: *Mining*. Cambridge University Press, Price: £95. 538pp. Volume VI: 6 Edited by Nathan Sivin. Part vi: *Medicine*. Cambridge University Press, Price: £45. 261pp.

The beginning of this towering work was projected to include seven volumes, each of which was imagined to comprise a single book. Within the seven volumes there were to be fifty sections. So vast was the erudition of Joseph Needham, and the dedication of his colleagues, that the single books bifurcated and then subdivided into as many as a dozen substantial additional volumes. Now, under the editorship of Nathan Sivin, the latest but by no means the last part of this work strides into the 21st century.

Sivin has prepared the work of Needham himself and Lu Gwei-Djen, on the science of medicine. He has edited the papers they had already prepared, revising them in the process to incorporate the results of recent research. But he also contributes a longer introduction, which carefully explores some of Needham's general ideas about the history of science, and of medicine in particular.

Actually one of Needham's earliest works was his contribution to *Science, Religion and Reality*, a collection which he edited in 1925. His essay was entitled 'Mechanistic Biology and the Religious Consciousness'. Three-quarters of a century ago he wrote:

'It is usually considered in this present age of universal subversion that the business of men is to speak only about their own affairs, and, if they have any world outlook, to keep it to themselves. Particularly is this the case with the scientific worker, but he is not alone in his mental prison. There joins it another, equally commodious but equally well bolted from outside, which is inhabited by the theologian and the mystic.'

The search for the key to his cell was evidently a powerful concern for this most universal of exploratory specialists, for whom no detail was too fine to elude examination. *Science and Civilisation in China* is a mine of information, much or most of which has been hitherto unavailable to Western scholars.

Needham never lost his fascination for such detail, and with the need to explain how things are constructed and why they work. But he never accepted the confines of his allotted cell. This explains his fascination with Taoism, which he saw as having a particular influence on the intellectual climate which fostered scientific attitudes in China.

Among the contributors to the 1925 volume had been Bronislaw Malinowski, whose essay on 'Magic, Science and Religion' was to become part of the skein of Needham's thinking. Sivin engages with

'the conviction of Lu and Needham that the borders between science, magic and religion were heavily travelled and that before modern times this was a matter of benefit to science'.

As Sivin points out this is not a trivial idea, but it is very difficult to refine it all in ways which facilitate specific conclusions. Does Taoism offer mediations which can help this work? According to Sivin, who had already taken issue with Needham's volume two, which offers an extended treatment of this question (in his paper of 1995), knowledge of the Taoist religion has developed considerably since 1980, provoking the need for more thought on some of its assumptions. Now, he argues, we need to pay more attention to social conflict, if we are to explain the actual evolution of science in China, and less to the internal evolution of technical traditions.

'Western astronomy triumphed in China in +1644, not because Chinese and Western astronomers had agreed that its time had come, but because Johann Adam Schall von Bell, given supreme power as Astronomer-Royal by the new Manchu Overlords of China, commanded the career officials of the Bureau of Astronomy to learn Western astronomy without delay or lose their jobs'.

Similarly chemistry took over in the 19th century after the Peace Treaties following the opium wars permitted foreign missionaries to determine what should be taught to the students they could now recruit. Conversely, the Nanjing Government might easily have outlawed the practice of traditional medicine, were it not for the fact that its practitioners had learned how to lobby from the West, and applied their knowledge to practical effect.

Sivin's introduction is a mine of interesting ideas, and pointers for further work. The fact that it deals sternly with some of Needham's ideas, even important ones, should not surprise us. The discussion which is likely to ensue will inform the scholarship of the next century, no less than Needham's own massive labour would have informed the last, if only we had caught up with him.

After all this, Needham and Lu's own contribution contains its own excitements. It analyses the social position of doctors in traditional China, and then outlines the principal doctrines of Chinese medicine. Before entering more detailed examinations it considers the influence of the bureaucracy, and of religious systems, on the practice of medicine. There follow treatments on acupuncture, leading into a balance sheet of traditional Chinese medicine in the

light of Western medicine. Preventative hygiene is the subject of a whole section, as is diet. A fascinating chapter on the origins of immunology explores the use of inoculation over centuries.

The earlier volume on mining was published towards the end of 1999. It is the 13th part of Volume V, on chemistry and chemical technology: and it is the first history of Chinese mining to appear in any Western language. It ranges from Neolithic times to the present day, and concerns the extraction of a full range of substances, from non-ferrous metals, to arsenic and other non-metallic minerals.

Of course there is an extended discussion of the development of the coal industry, which dates back to Neolithic times, now revealed in the discovery of carved ornaments wrought from black lignite. During the first and second centuries of the present era, there is evidence of the use of coal in iron production. Briquettes were already being manufactured at that time.

Professor Golas documents the comparative backwardness of mining technology, over a long period of time: it contains no mysteries. A vast supply of cheap rural labour has meant that clever techniques were none too necessary, although great ingenuity was developed all around, in other crafts. But for invention to prosper in fields like this, it helps if labour is expensive, and difficult to keep.

Ken Coates

Britain's first atomic bomb

Fred Roberts, *Sixty Years of Nuclear History*, 1999. 196pp plus index, glossary and bibliography. £12 in paperback from Jon Carpenter Publishing 01608 811969 or from bookshops ISBN 1 897766 48 3

The author, Fred Roberts, helped to make Britain's first atomic bomb in 1952. He has drawn carefully on his inside knowledge and many other sources to write a history of nuclear weapons and the close links with nuclear energy from the 1930s to date. He writes clearly and engagingly about the physics, the technology and the politics. A cold recollection of the facts is sufficient to explain to those who were misinformed or not informed at the time, and to those new to the topic, just how close to extinction we have been and how urgent the problems of proliferation and waste management remain.

The author effortlessly makes it clear that democratic decision-making has had little to do with nuclear affairs. The secrecy, sometimes necessary, and the deception that so easily followed, still obscure the picture. That Churchill did not tell his Deputy Prime Minister Attlee that Britain was privy to the development of an atomic bomb was only the beginning. When Attlee became Prime Minister he did not tell his cabinet. Parliament was involved later mainly in voting expenditure concealed in omnibus headings.

Roberts has an eye for missed opportunities to create a safer world. The

unsuccessful efforts of Niels Bohr to influence Roosevelt and Churchill in 1945 are described. The year 1955 was described by the British negotiator Lord Noel Baker as containing 'the moment of hope' for nuclear disarmament and no explanation is offered for the American retreat from a 'no first use' position in otherwise apparently successful negotiations.

In the 1980s when there were enough weapons to kill every person on earth Mikhail Gorbachev's sanity and humanity stood out. His initiative in unilateral force reduction led to the negotiation of the Intermediate Nuclear Force's treaty limiting the deployment of intermediate range nuclear weapons. Reductions in tactical nuclear weapons followed with NATO declaring all nuclear weapons 'weapons of last resort' (suggesting that tactical weapons had had some other status).

Too recent for inclusion in the book, there has since been the eastern expansion of NATO to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, the American Congress's failure to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and a US 'Star War' Mark 2 missile defence programme. On 10 January 2000 Vladimir Putin signed Russia's revised National Security Concept relaxing Russia's limitations on the use of its nuclear weapons.

The elimination of nuclear weapons is not just the dream of CND supporters. Lord Carver, formerly chief of Britain's defence staff, two former NATO supreme commanders, John Galvin and Bernard Rogers, General Alexander Lebed, Yeltsin's former security adviser, and more than 50 other generals and admirals from many countries concluded in December 1996 that the end of the Cold War made international control and the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons possible. But it does not seem to Fred Roberts that Britain is following their lead.

If you know the answers to the following questions you may not need to read this book. If you buy it for your children and your grandchildren they too will find something to remind them of Tony Blair's support for a 'Star Wars' defence system for the United States using bases in Britain.

by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate to privatisation (at Dounreay) or the preparations for privatisation (at Sellafield). Roberts quotes the 1976 recommendation of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution – that there should be no commitment to a large nuclear power programme ‘until it has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that a method exists to ensure the safe containment of long lived highly radioactive waste for the indefinite future’.

In explanation of the ‘indefinite future’ the Commission said:

‘We must assume that these wastes will remain dangerous and will need to be isolated from the biosphere for hundreds of thousands of years. In considering arrangements for dealing safely with such waste man is faced with timescales that transcend his experience.’

Chris Gifford

Ethical bombing

Tariq Ali, Ed. *Masters of the Universe: Nato’s Balkan Crusade*, Verso, Paperback £15, Hardback £40, 429pp

Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman, Eds. *Degraded Capability: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis*, Pluto Press, Paperback £14.99, Hardback £45, 256pp

These two books offer a searing focus on Nato’s war on Yugoslavia.

A year after the event, the humanitarian pretensions of this war have very largely evaporated. This is not to minimise the horrors of the conflict in Kosovo before Nato intervened. It had become a full-scale guerrilla insurgency, involving considerable brutalities on both sides. Those Albanians, at one time a considerable majority, who favoured a peaceful transition to autonomy, were to be systematically sidelined, and pushed out of the frame by the very Nato powers who said they sought to defend Albanian rights, while some of them armed and trained the guerrillas.

As Tariq Ali points out, after the war, Kosovo Liberation Army leader, Hashim Thaqi, attended a match in the football stadium at Pristina in September 1999 and ‘the crowd greeted him with continuous chants of “Rugova, Rugova”’. But Rugova’s star was not in the ascendant in the West, and it was the military men who were to come to predominate in post-war Kosovo. By the beginning of the year 2000, they were assassinating one another in a turf war, which no longer involved the Serbs at all, most of whom had already been ethnically cleansed.

But the drug trade which played so important a role in funding the KLA in the beginning, now provides a serious component of its present resources, and its

Degraded Capability documents the role of the media in manipulating the consent in the West for Nato's war in Kosovo. As Phillip Knightley says, 'news coverage of international crises is now dictated by Western governments with their spin doctors and propagandists'. But these two books, taken together, unravel the finely spun fictions which justified the bombings, and offer a convincing explanation of the grubbier processes which led to war.

Peter Gowan offers two compelling papers on the Euro-Atlantic origins of Nato's attack on Yugoslavia, teasing out the American motives for promoting such a war. His essay in Tariq Ali's volume is complemented by another which he has placed in the Hammond/Herman collection, on the war and its aftermath.

The human cost of the war, he shows, is hotly disputed. Agence France Presse reported on the 3rd August 1999 that 'as many as one hundred thousand Kosovo Albanians had been slaughtered by Serbian security forces'. At the end of the war, Nato claimed that the death rate was ten thousand or more, buried in approximately one hundred sites. Bernard Kouchner claimed not ten, but eleven thousand deaths, citing the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia as his source. But the ICTY denied any such estimate, and actually accused President Milosevic in its own indictment, of responsibility for the deaths of three hundred and fifty people. This is greatly less than the number of civilians killed by the Nato bombing. In point of fact, the search for bodies of Albanian massacre victims has unearthed no evidence for these large claims: but it is not yet complete. At the moment, the spinners appear to have multiplied the deaths by at least five, up to fifty, times.

On the basis of the evidence presented here, the 'humanitarian' defence of Nato's war is not sustainable. The war killed more people than were at risk before it happened, it eliminated moderate constitutional leaders from contention for the leadership in Kosovo, it accelerated ethnic cleansing, first in the flight of the Albanian population from Kosovo, after the bombardment began, and then in the effective deportation of large numbers of the Serbs who had been resident in the province. It placed control in the hands of a Kosovo Liberation Army which respects none of the proclaimed allegiances to human rights. It leaves the allies deeply divided about their commitment to maintaining the uneasy policing of Kosovo. The war itself has been sublimated into a far-reaching programme of sanctions and discrimination aimed at displacing Milosevic from power in Serbia, and reinforced by threats to engineer the breakaway of Montenegro from Yugoslavia.

If the 'West' were to succeed in establishing a client state in Serbia, then perhaps it would be able to discipline the KLA in Kosovo, and prevent the development of a greater Albanian state which would undermine the stability of the wider region. But there is no guarantee that this will happen, and the turmoil in the region is at least as likely to divide Nato than anneal it into some kind of effective unity.

But behind all this is a much deeper problem. It is nothing to do with human rights, but a great deal to do with the international balance of power. The

Yugoslav war was a step too far for the Russians. Now we have a new Russian President, a new Russian nuclear doctrine, and a newly assertive Russian

major scoop to the *Sunday Times*. Producing some forty kilograms of plutonium each year, Israel could manufacture ten nuclear weapons every year, so that over the ten years in which Vanunu had been employed in Dimona, this would have yielded something over one hundred nuclear weapons, putting Israel in the same league as China, France, or even the UK. But the stock of basic nukes was not all: Dimona was producing tritium, and lithium hydrides, which had already made Israel a thermo-nuclear weapon power.

Why was this story being revealed? Frank Barnaby wondered whether the Israelis themselves wished to divulge the facts about their nuclear capacity, as part of the game of deterrence in the Arab world. Some of the *Sunday Times* staffers were not altogether sure about this, either.

Unfortunately, these questions were soon given a decisive answer. At this point the story of a journalistic scoop becomes an international spy thriller. Hounam describes how Vanunu was targeted by the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, and lured into a 'honey trap'. A Mossad agent, 'Cindy', met up with him and soon arranged a date at the Tate Gallery. Blow by blow Hounam reconstructs the wiles of Vanunu's abduction. In view of his growing interest in Christianity, he proposed leaving London for a visit to York Minster. In the event, Cindy lured him instead to Rome. There, he was abducted, doped, imprisoned and exported by ship to Tel Aviv. So far as anyone can see, the breaches of Italian and British law involved in such an abduction have not caused Israel to incur the smallest official reproach from these two countries.

The rest of the story is very widely known. In a secret trial, Mordechai Vanunu was given an eighteen year sentence for treason and espionage. Most of this he has served in solitary confinement. All around the world, representations have been made against the inhumanity of this punishment, but the Israeli authorities remained obdurately deaf for more than twelve years.

Meantime, remorselessly, the Israeli nuclear stock pile has been increasing, and even without a surge in productivity, it is clear that today Israel disposes of between three and four hundred nukes. Today, cruise missiles are also tested.

This is a gripping story, and Peter Hounam has told it with great economy and pace. It should be widely diffused, because everyone needs to know how the doctrine of non-proliferation has fared in the Near East, where a modern peace process is once again trying to back away from military confrontation. Meantime, the whistle blower is still confined, with five more years to serve. The Israeli authorities should not be allowed any remission from protest until this crying injustice is set right.

James Forsyth