

Ill fares the land the land

Michael Barratt Brown

Michael Barratt Brown is the founding principal of Northern College and author of Young Person's Guide to the Global Crisis and the Alternative (Spokesman, £9).

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay;*

When Oliver Goldsmith wrote these lines of the *Deserted Village* in 1770, the Agricultural and Industrial Revolution had only just begun its devastation of so many countrymen's lives, driving them into rotten slums and dark satanic mills. It was another two hundred years before the benefits of those revolutions were to be widely felt. We are now at the beginning of the Technological and Information Revolutions, experiencing the inequalities and human decay that they are bringing with them. How soon can we look forward to a time when, for most people, the benefits outweigh the losses? That is the question which is addressed in books and articles listed at the end. It is a big question.

We can start with the facts. These are most cogently presented in David Beetham's *Democratic Audit 2011*. They are neatly summarised in the title he gives to this internet publication, *Unelected Oligarchy and Financial Dominance in Britain's Democracy*. Beetham's conclusions are frankly pessimistic, even fatalistic. Are there no countervailing democratic forces to those increasing the dominance of finance – in more open government, more transparent contracts – and what of the student revolts and the 'occupations', not only in the UK but in the US and elsewhere? And this is not just a small minority action; opinion polls reveal a remarkable degree of dissatisfaction with the status quo. What is lacking is a widely agreed alternative route map.

Steve Keen's book on *Debunking Economics* challenges the whole philo-

sophical basis of economics and ends with a chapter entitled 'There are alternatives'. It examines five alternative schools to the accepted neo-classical one. They all have weaknesses, though I would agree with Keen in accepting neo-Keynesianism, if Marxism is ruled out as a political economy, and not as economics, pure and simple.

What is wrong with economics, as Keen perceives it, is that the market is assumed to produce an equilibrium, at least in the long run, in which all resources are fully used. In fact, unemployed labour and over production of goods are typical of capitalism, as Marx never ceased to point out. The several versions of economics that Keen examines – Austrian, post-Keynesian, Sraffian, 'econo-physics', evolutionary economics – all suffer, he insists, from the same limitations, though I would exempt the post-Keynesians from accepting a purely static analysis in their clear understanding of financial crises. This has become more widely accepted in the current world-wide financial crisis, which would seem to have undermined all mathematical equilibria, though many business leaders, economic advisers and government ministers are reluctant to accept the reality of a crisis-ridden world.

The very title of David Harvey's new book, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*, suggests that we have here an approach to reality, and this is confirmed by Harvey's earlier books on 'neo-liberalism' and on Marxism, which predicted the deepening crisis of capital. Capital, as Harvey sees it, is a flow. He compares it to the weather systems on our planet, which are as little understood, giving floods in some places, droughts in others, storms and hurricanes, rather like economic growth and development here and recession and financial crises there. The world is as crisis prone as the weather is changeable. And in each case the crisis is deeper and the climate worse for human survival, and both forms of deterioration are man-made – dismantling the welfare state in the first case, carbon dioxide emissions in the second.

Harvey sees the endless accumulation of capital, which has kept the system running, as clearly now self-defeating. He is less clear about what to do, and who is to do it. He looks for a revolutionary politics, based on radical egalitarianism, arising from the alienated and discontented. But he recognises that there is no common front or programme. Student protests and anti-capitalist 'occupations', as well as the international social fora, are showing the way, but there is much hard building work to be done, and Harvey ends with a quotation from Shakespeare, 'The fault ... is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings'.

Dexter Whitfield's book, *In Place of Austerity*, is much more

prescriptive, as befits the Director of the European Services Strategy Unit. The first half consists of the most devastating analysis of the ways in which the current UK Coalition Government's policies, that combine personalisation, financialisation and marketisation, are destructing democracy in an emerging corporate welfare state leased out to the private sector. On the basis of this analysis, and the inevitable failure of such a project, Dexter builds his picture of an alternative role for the state, not as a regulator working from the top downwards, but as a creative force building from below upwards, from peoples' expressed community and individual needs. In particular, in each of the public services, education, health, pensions and the social services, the failure of provision left to the private sector with voluntary support will, he believes, create renewed demands for truly social provision.

It is not so much a revolution, in the sense of an overturning of the capitalist state, that Dexter envisages as an unrolling of a people-centred, democratically controlled and accountable social movement. It is a highly pragmatic approach that can be achieved by trade unions and community organisations step by step in one area at a time, so long as resources can be directed to meeting social needs. Regional governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are showing the way, and other regions will follow suit. The economies and similarities of large scale provision are beginning to pall, as the inefficiencies of waste and pollution become more obvious and conservation more necessary in face of climate change.

The fightback has begun

2011 will be remembered as the year when the fight-back began against the dictatorships and oppression of the so-called 'neo-liberal' Washington consensus. It began in the Arab world in actual battles – in Tunisia, then Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and finally Libya. But disturbances were occurring in Europe – in Greece and Spain and in Britain – with street marches, demonstrations and occupations, and also in the USA – in Washington, New York and other big cities. The most remarkable one took place in the occupation of the Madison Capitol in the state of Wisconsin, and that is what is recorded in *We are Wisconsin*.

The link between the Arab world and Wisconsin was much closer than you might have supposed. The new information technology means that blogs and twitters cross all the national and geographical boundaries. It so happened that the occupation by Egyptians of Tahrir Square in Cairo was taking place when the occupation of the Madison Capitol began. It was not long before Cairenes were using their credit cards to respond to the call

from Madison requesting pizzas from the pizza house near the Capitol. A page full of examples of twitters is found between each of the eighteen chapters contributed to this book by students, teachers, farmers, local government workers and others, even firemen and policemen, who took part in the occupation.

Why Madison, why Wisconsin? One may well ask. Wisconsin is a Middle West state lying along Lake Michigan, just north of Chicago. It has a long tradition of trade union and farmers' community organisation, and a Socialist hero, Senator Robert La Follette, who stood for the US Presidency in the 1920s and gave his name to a famous School of Politics. Trade unionism is particularly strong among teachers in Madison, and they provided the backbone of the Capitol occupation. There were several thousand men and women who occupied the Capitol, taking their sleeping bags with them to lie on the marble tiles and scrubbing the floors and clearing away all rubbish under strict supervision of their own elected supervisors. That they were supported outside the Capitol standing in deep snow and bitter cold by many thousands of other local government workers, farmers, engineers, firemen and even policemen, because the message that the occupiers were pressing was to 'stand firm to defend your just rights' to 'dignity, equal opportunity and fair play' – a message that had a very wide appeal.

One reason for the strength of this popular protest must have been the particular vehemence of Governor Scott Walker's action in using a state financial deficit to justify not only large cuts in public sector workers' salaries but also restrictions on their bargaining rights. His suggestion made on a fake phone call with a rich friend, that he had considered employing thugs to provoke violence among the protesters, did the Governor considerable damage. The occupation ended when the Governor ensured that the Capitol was closed, ejecting all the occupiers, apart from a brave few who remained to be arrested. He followed this up by implanting his anti-union proposals. Whether the popular demand for the recall of his supporting senators will succeed has still to be tested.

As one of the contributors to this book noted, the question remained; 'Does Wisconsin represent the birth of a new, powerful progressive movement, or is it simply the last violent, desperate gasps of air of a dying movement?' And another, somewhat more optimistic, concluded, 'The question being posed to all of us in Wisconsin is whether we are going to make the most of this historic opportunity and organise, from the bottom up, a labour movement that fights, or fritter it away because of the fear that things will get out of hand?' The book's editor ends on a cautious note;

‘While the tale of the Wisconsin struggle evolves every day, this collection captures a moment in time that is part of a much longer story that has only begun’. The fightback goes on.

David Beetham, *Unelected Oligarchy, Corporate and Financial Domination in Britain’s Democracy*, Democratic Audit 2011, 24 pages, free online (www.democraticaudit.com/publications)

Steve Keen, *Debunking Economics: The Naked Emperor Dethroned?*, Zed Books revised edition 2011, 478 pages, paperback ISBN 9781848139923, £18.99

David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, Profile Books 2011, 320 pages, paperback ISBN 9781846683091, £8.99

Dexter Whitfield, *In Place of Austerity: Reconstructing the economy, state and public services*, Spokesman 2012, 272 pages, paperback ISBN 9780851247939, £18.00

Erica Sagrans (editor), *We are Wisconsin*, Tasora Books 2011, 296 pages, paperback ISBN 9781934690482, £11.75