

Reviews

Postmodernisation?

Oskar Lafontaine: *The Heart Beats on the Left*, Polity, 219pp. £12.99 paperback.

At first sight, the triple resignation of Oskar Lafontaine was a serious blow to the Social Democratic Party in Germany. The Finance Minister resigned his office, his membership of the Bundestag, and his position as Party Chairman at the same time. There followed a storm of speculations and commentaries, through which this book breasts its way with some disdain, but with powerful clarity.

What becomes clear at once is that Lafontaine is not simply commenting on the evolution of his own Party in Germany, but is highlighting a much wider crisis afflicting much of European social democracy, and paralysing British Labour. In his preface to the English edition, the author confronts the relevance of his own experience to the predicament of social democracy in Europe as a whole.

‘The only chance’, he says, ‘that social democrats have of winning political majorities is by representing the interests of the workers, the unemployed and the pensioners. In the corporate sector their primary concern must lie with small and medium sized businesses. Since medium sized firms do not depend on international finance capital to the same extent as large scale businesses, there is less pressure on them to subordinate the achievement of their economic goals to the urge to maximise their Stock Exchange valuation.’

But Tony Blair has ‘modernised’ all these perceptions, in an effort to make New Labour the voice of Middle England. This modernisation has stiffened his policy with strong inputs, not from small, but from very large business indeed. The oil companies are all over Mr. Blair, and even more all over the forest of quangos which he has set in place to surround his machinery of Government. The CBI exerts greater influence on British industrial policy than the TUC. The Welfare State is modernised out of its mind by means tests and creeping privatisation through the Private Finance Initiative. All this runs under the flag of neo-liberalism, which is now proclaimed as the Third Way.

Lafontaine’s great merit is that, for him, none of this constitutes genuine modernisation. What would be modern would be the affirmation of scope for human development, and for the self-fulfilment of all those whose personal growth is presently blocked and stunted by the exercise of market forces. The only acceptable ‘modernity’ has to be human centred.

Blair’s modernity sings from a very old hymn sheet indeed: far older than the much despised Clause IV. It identifies with the continuous concentration of economic power, the tendency to monopoly, which has been a consistent feature

of capitalist development from the very beginning. Hence the drive for deregulation, which insists that Government should get out of the way of the great juggernauts, so that they may roll over us the more smoothly.

What the Third Way has never explained is why Governments remain necessary, and to what purpose all the effort and pressure that goes to the political process is bent. Governments may no longer intervene to sustain or redirect industry: they may no longer impose social obligations on business: their plans must remain strictly tentative, the codification of wish lists politely unenforced: the very embodiment of toothlessness. This senile disintegration of Government is thus presented as the acme of modernity.

But States do retain a 'modern' function, which is expressed in their age-old military purposes. Lafontaine fought the good fight to try to defend the goal of the European Welfare State. But like everyone else, he was run over by the chariots of war. Twelve days after he resigned, Nato attacked Yugoslavia, in violation of the United Nations Charter, and indeed against the precise letter of the North Atlantic Treaty itself. The gathering dangers of war with Yugoslavia had become evident throughout the fraught negotiations at Rambouillet, and Lafontaine offers a very candid description of how the German Government drifted into its commitment to war. As he points out, the Manifesto of German Social Democracy is very precise:

'Nato is and remains a defensive Alliance. The monopoly of power to enforce the maintenance of peace in the world lies exclusively with the United Nations. Actions by Nato which go beyond its remit for the exercise of collective defence require a mandate from the United Nations or from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.'

Of course, the bombing of Yugoslavia helped to create a climate in which the Nato Summit of 1999 could proclaim a completely new doctrine of interventionism, which attempted to assert a free-standing posture in relation to the UN, and which made a unilateral claim extending the doctrine of self-defence to cover the maintenance of essential supplies. (Such, of course, as oil.)

Military modernisation is very strong on diabolical hardware, and unlike political modernisation, it really is composed of new things which do generate new ideas. However, not all new things are good things. The whole argument about 'modernisation' harks back to the ancient doctrinal illusions concerning the inexorable unwinding of 'progress'.

Things are not like that. They can go backwards, too. Tony Blair has gone backwards a very long way, and has only been hindered in his retrograde movement by the reluctance of Labour Party members to follow him. Unfortunately, this reluctance up to now, has not been anything like strong enough. Military 'progress' is more complex. Modern weapons do not entail any advance in humane behaviour. Modern generals can scythe down their opponents with remorseless efficiency, but this does not entail great forward surges in their judgement, morality, or common humanity.

Lafontaine says he was slow to identify the Yugoslav crusade for what it was, but as soon as he did, he firmly demanded an immediate stop to the bombing and the resumption of negotiations. Alas, this call went unheard. The war went on to cause destruction which will cost sixty billion Deutschmarks to repair. But

‘The Americans, who bore the brunt of the costs of the war, say that it is now the Europeans’ turn.’

Ruefully we are reminded that the Red/Green coalition has a Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, who once told us that he aspired to the day when Germany would pursue an alternative foreign policy ‘without recourse to an army’.

Even if progress regularly includes features of retrogression, the progress of the Bundeswehr is unlikely to come to an end with one bloody encounter in the Balkans. Having let this genie out of the bottle, it may well appear again and again, until the domestic opposition is strong enough to confine it.

Lafontaine’s answer to this problem is straightforward: alongside the American superpower ‘we need a strong united Europe’. But a common European defence and security policy will not serve our purpose if it is contained within the framework of the new Nato, and bent to the service of neo-liberalism. More wars will be generated where this last one has come from, and some of the voyagers along the Third Way have shown their enthusiasm for this project. Their modernisation can live with poverty: but it also extends to a high appreciation of cocked hats and snazzy uniforms.

Oskar Lafontaine’s book is an extraordinary mixture of political argument and self-justification, of autobiography and profound commentary. Having survived an attempt on his life, and reached the leadership of one of Europe’s great parties, he has lived through a range of political experiences which are fascinating, and a personal ordeal which is deeply moving. Is it all now finished? Many wise commentators have told us that it is. It is true that Oskar Lafontaine may not be recalled to lead his Party again. But some of us would be very happy indeed if he were. The real question is why do so many people feel identified with this man who tells us he would be a farmer if he were clever enough?

The answer is quite straightforward. Right or wrong, here is a man who tells us the truth about what has happened to him, and what he feels about it. ‘Modernisation’ has filleted any vestige of truth out of the politicians who serve it. If they could, they would doubtless expunge such embarrassing relics of the socialist tradition as are affirmed in this book. But the heart does beat on the left, and we shall remember Oskar Lafontaine long after Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder have reversed right over the end of the Third Way to nowhere in particular.

Ken Coates

Warts and all

Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx, Fourth Estate, London 1999, pp.432, £8.99*

It is not a small thing to take on the biography of a man who has been more written about, with more praise and more calumny, than probably any other human being, save only Jesus Christ. Marx himself might have been surprised but pleased to know that 116 years after his death a new and sympathetic biography in English should be well received. Francis Wheen's exceedingly readable book has been very well received and it richly deserves to be so. I have just read it on a long plane journey from Lima to London, and I hardly noticed the passing of the hours and was sorry when I finished it.

There is little in the book that I did not already know from Marx's own writings, from Engels, and from Yvonne Kapp's incomparable two volume life of Eleanor Marx, which is perhaps not given adequate acknowledgement by Wheen. The great value of the book is that it is so well written and composed, as to give to anyone unfamiliar with the whole range of Marx's writings and political activities the essential elements of this extraordinary life. His immense width and depth of reading in many languages, his voluminous and illegible notes arising from what he read, which others including his long-suffering wife Jenny had to transcribe, his articles for German, French, American, Russian and English newspapers, his speeches and lectures, his vast correspondence, his political and economic essays and above all his great work on *Capital, a Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, are all welded together in this book by Wheen with the terrible circumstances of Marx's life, his successive exiles, his poverty, his illnesses, the loss of children, the lack of recognition.

This is the book which any student of whatever age should read who seriously wants to know what Marx was about, and to find how relevant his work might be for our present condition. It is, at the same time, a wonderful reminder for those who already have some understanding. Wheen has also corrected some misunderstandings, for example about Marx's son Freddy and about Darwin's acknowledgement of Marx's work and has given special attention to Marx's use of irony, which some plodding scholars have missed. If there is anything in the book that might perhaps be criticised it is that somehow in the long story of the delays and mishaps and procrastinations that occurred in the actual delivery of the first volume of *Capital* and in the failure to deliver the next two volumes, which Engels had to write up after Marx's death, some picture is lacking of the sheer towering magnitude of the whole endeavour. If people are still quoting Marx or paraphrasing him, and many do so without knowing it, this is because of the truly formidable insight and foresight that is revealed again and again in Marx's writings. To end this biography, Wheen has found a comment from an American journalist who interviewed Marx playing with his grandchildren on Ramsgate beach in the summer of 1880. In answer to a portentous question 'What is?', Marx after deep thought replied, 'Struggle'. It was not said in despair, but as the law of life.

Michael Barratt Brown

Moral problem not solved

Mary Palevsky, *Atomic Fragments – A Daughter’s Questions*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 289pp. £15.95

Mary Palevsky’s parents worked on the development of the atomic bomb during the Second World War. The experience troubled them, and was part of the atmosphere of Mary’s early upbringing. When they died, they left her with an unsolved moral problem, and this book is the poignant result. She went in search of explanations.

Ms Palevsky asked a galaxy of atomic scientists why they co-operated in the building of the bomb, and whether they approved of its use on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The great men do not come out of this enquiry as clear exponents of the bomb’s rationale. The response of Hans Bethe, for instance, says much of it.

‘The bomb is an evil thing, there is no question and my first reaction after Hiroshima was we should never use it again. Immediately after the surrender I was completely devoted to arms control. But once fission was found and there was a war, it was a foregone conclusion that the bomb would be made.’

Asked whether Bethe agreed with Oppenheimer’s judgement that the atomic scientists had ‘known sin’, he agreed.

‘He said it in the context of saying that some day the name “Los Alamos” will be cursed.’

Towering among these interviews is that with Joseph Rotblat, who quit Los Alamos when he understood that the German nuclear programme had failed. He was enraged by the destruction of Hiroshima.

‘People learned about nuclear energy for the first time, not from reactors but from bombs.’

This put the profession of science under a stigma. The Manhattan Project was staffed in the main by intelligent, humane and sophisticated people. They later tended to feel guilt, but also to suffer from a most painful ambivalence, since they had not made the war, and had no responsibility for its conduct.

Harry Palevsky had the opportunity to work out these tensions, when his daughter came up against student radical opinion. In a family argument, she burst out with an opinion she had not intended to express.

‘What gives you the right to decide what is good or bad for me to do? You worked on atomic bombs that killed 150,000 people. And you are always telling me what you know about being a good person. Look at what you have done!’

But Mary Palevsky knew the decency of her parents, and so the conundrum that she faced drove her into a quest for answers. With sympathy and affection,

but a clear head, she tried to secure the evidence. It does not point to any clear answer to the moral questions which she knows remain essential.

As the articles of Zhores Medvedev have shown recent readers of the *Spokesman*, the same questions plagued the creators of Russia's nuclear potential.

We are members of one another, in our ignorance as well as our knowledge, and the only good that would come from the bomb would lie in the discovery of this truth, which will be mastered by those who achieve its abolition.

John Hall

Justice and power

***SIPRI Yearbook 2000, Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oxford University Press, 758pp, £60.00**

The *SIPRI Yearbook* remains an indispensable tool for all concerned with the world of armaments, disarmament, and security. It enters the new Millennium with all its old authority, and remains the standard source of information on military expenditure, arms production, the major arms producing companies, the transfers of conventional weapons, and nuclear arms control and proliferation.

The overall plan of the Yearbook thus continues traditions which have been long established. It is dedicated to Frank Blackaby, who was not only the founder of the *SIPRI Yearbook* itself, and a Director of the Institute at a critical period: but who was also a good friend and constant source of inspiration for *The Spokesman*.

But things have changed, even if conflicts remain with us always. Two contributions by Adam Daniel Rotfeld seek to offer an analytic framework within which we can understand these changes.

In his introduction, he gives his view of the collapse of the bipolar world, which followed the ending of the Cold War. He grapples with the American dominance, and seeks to understand the consequent mutations in the policy of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the new strategic concept of Nato, and the responding changes in Russian military doctrine, seen here as a failure on the part of the Russians to 'understand' the shift in the balance of power. The reasoning of the Russians 'embodies a dual simplification . . . it assumes that security . . . will be based on balance of power politics . . . (and) failing to take into account the new correlation of forces. The new, powerful position of the USA in the world is a fact'.

In his second essay, Rotfeld analyses the new transatlantic agenda in Europe. He does not fail to point up the tensions and disagreements which wrack Nato, but nonetheless he presumes that the American ascendancy is so far unchallengeable as to set the foreseeable future framework of international relations. These assumptions would be the ones that promoted the most active debate, if the renewed peace movement were to continue its development.

The stability of the American system cannot be taken for granted. Its relations with Europe are unstable, and today's successes tend to become tomorrow's challenges. The Yugoslav war, for instance, began with the deliberate exclusion of the Russians from the process by the sidelining of the United Nations. Inadequate though the United Nations may be as an instrument to contain a single preponderant power, nevertheless its legacy provides us with the only agreed international framework for regulating matters of peace and war. When Nato roared off into unilateral action, it made claims which it will be unable to enforce. The rest of the world will recognise preponderant power, but it will have no sense of preponderant justice. And in the modern world, power without justice will not endure. The crumbling of the UN system generates excesses on all sides. Arrogant Nato doctrines generate frightening Russian military counter-doctrines, and will no doubt provoke other questionable responses.

Opposition to these developments will not be confined to state policies. Military power is an important argument: but it is the growth of popular opposition, of public criticism among the peoples, which may be the basis for the necessary transformation of the old world order into new and more acceptable conditions.

Stephen Smith

Russell on the rack

Thom Weidlich, *Appointment Denied: The Inquisition of Bertrand Russell*, Prometheus Books, 233pp, \$25.00

Thom Weidlich has delved into the celebrated case of Bertrand Russell's exclusion from the Faculty of the City College in New York. In 1940, the Board of Higher Education of New York City appointed Russell to lecture in Philosophy at the College. He was expected to lecture on logic and its relation to science, mathematics and philosophy, on problems in the foundation of mathematics, and on relations of pure to applied sciences, and the reciprocal influence of metaphysics and scientific theories. There was high enthusiasm among the students, excited by the prospect of so brilliant a teacher.

Unfortunately, Russell's popular writing, for which he was later to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, touched on a number of themes which were not regarded as seemly by established opinion. Was not Russell an atheist, a proponent of free love, a free thinker? The dean of Catholic journalists knew for certain exactly what this meant.

'One would have to be impossibly naive to think that Russell would eschew all mention of his views on marriage and sex morality even if he were teaching geology or cosmology,' he wrote.

In fact, Russell had informed the department to which he was to be assigned that he did not wish to teach ethics.

Nonetheless, an amazing hoo-ha ensued. Militant democrats saw in this

appointment an opportunity to teach the reformist Mayor of New York, La Guardia, a lesson.

A Brooklyn housewife sued the Board of Education to stop the appointment of this terrible libertine. La Guardia quickly found the limits of his liberalism, and a most unpleasant frenzy ensued, in which no allegation was too exotic or absurd to level against the new appointee. Einstein, who had lectured at City College in 1921, recorded his opinion in verse:

'It keeps repeating itself
In this world, so fine and honest:
The parson alarms the populace
The genius is excluded.'

This genius was not only excluded: he was metaphorically placed in the pillory, and no ordure proved too infragant to throw at him. Suddenly Russell was accused of the advocacy of homosexuality, even incest. Bishops and politicians vied for the lewder charges. The City College Philosophy Faculty wrote a collective essay 'Comparing Russell to Socrates, and the court actions with the inquisition of Galileo'. But nonetheless Russell was never able to teach at City College.

A cautionary tale is presented here, objectively, and without exaggeration.

Some, like G.D.H. Cole or John Strachey, actually learnt lessons from Gosplan. Others were happy to develop the idea of indicative planning, but were also happy to exploit the verbal confusions which enabled people to think that they intended to determine industrial policy, rather than simply to follow where it led.

A careful study of what social democrats thought they could do over the years would show that they were frequently mesmerised by Russian experience. Crossman and possibly Wilson thought that Khrushchev really might overtake the West in certain important areas, and saw the need to plan in order to avoid this eventuality. In some important respects, the failure of the Soviet model derived from similar causes to the failings of social democracy. Experiments in planning were compelled to base themselves on measures to plan the inherited economy. They could anticipate certain changes within that structure, but it was impossibly difficult to plan for changes of that structure. So new technologies had a habit of defeating old planners. The old plan would continue to work, but it would not leap into the optimal developments of new methods, because old routines were known and understood.

There was a fairly conspicuous exception to this rule. The Soviet Union showed itself to be exceptionally adaptable to the needs of military technologies. Undoubtedly this involved the distortion of the non-military economy, and its subordination to the precise objectives of the war machine.

It can be argued that it was militarism itself which overthrew Communism, and it certainly looks quite likely that Western militarism may well be undermining capitalism, even in the absence of the historical adversary.

A hubbub of different opinions can be found in this interesting volume, which includes some salutary warnings from Paul Hirst on the scope and limits of globalism. But Hirst gives a fourfold agenda: the promotion of growth and employment, regulation to promote democratic accountability of companies, maintenance of welfare and public service, and tackling the international financial market and monetary system. This exempts Government from any interventionist responsibility, to correct industrial imbalance, promote regional development, or rescue beleaguered industries. Of course all these occasion a greater or lesser degree of protectionism, and it is precisely in this context that an unbridgeable gulf yawns between the underdeveloped and the developed countries. Without a degree of protection, it is impossible to foster new industries or protect old ones.

In Britain, in particular, this problem will, in the medium term, sink New Labour without trace. The collapse of manufactures and a traditional industrial base will leave middle England floating in a disembodied electronic world. Only if the knowledge revolution can uncharacteristically confine itself within a chosen territory will it then be able to feed itself. Since the global dimensions of policy are fostered precisely in the new technologies, their universal reach will make it increasingly difficult for those who grow nothing, make nothing or change no material part of the world they live in to survive, when the only thing they can do can already be done by legions of others.

Most of these authors are more or less critical of New Labour, but their complaints do not add up to a critique. Cogent thoughts about equality of opportunity and the meaning of fairness presume that distributive justice is possible and accessible. But today, the political classes have become so accustomed to distributing the fruits of the toil of others, that they are quite unready for the world which they are creating, in which there may be less and less available to distribute.

James Kelly

Subcontinental bombs

Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, *New Nukes: India, Pakistan and Global Disarmament*, Signal Books, £12.99

'If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: We have the power to destroy everything that You have created. If you're not religious, then look at it this way. This world of ours is four billion, six hundred million years old. It could end in an afternoon'.

Thus reads the heartfelt warning by Arundhati Roy which opens this powerful new book (see *Spokesman* 68), whose authors are two of India's leading journalists and founders of MIND (Movement for Indian Nuclear Disarmament). The arguments for abolition of nuclear weapons are presented here from fresh perspectives, offering new insights to Western anti-nuclear activists. For instance, the authors reject the argument that the hypocrisy of the Western nuclear states drove India to join the nuclear club, arguing that this position lets us off the hook of tackling the complexities of Indian domestic politics (including the role of the Marxist parties).

The authors emphasise the cost of nuclear weapons development, notably in terms of resources diverted away from improving living standards. There is also the health and environmental cost of radioactive contamination around nuclear installations. As devastating as this is in the USA, it is even more bitter in a country such as India, where more than 400 million people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty.

So often we read a brilliant analysis of US imperialism only to be left high and dry when it comes to paths of resistance. Bidwai and Vanaik do not shy away from the question of how to 'convince enough people to join the race against time'. 'The value of nuclear peace must be made tangible in some way, and to do that it has to be connected to the prospects of achieving concrete and visible forms of progress, that is, to the realisation of more liveable alternatives'. The book doesn't offer a definitive answer, but the ideas it contains help open up the search for answers. We can learn from voices from South Asia. The International Peace Bureau has now recognised this by awarding the Sean MacBride Prize to the authors of *New Nukes*.

Rae Street