

# Reviews

## 'Untimely Reflections' on Terror

**Gore Vidal, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, Clairview, 160 pages, ISBN 1 902636 38 4, £8.95**

*Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* reproduces a collection of Vidal's writings which originally appeared in *The Nation* and *Vanity Fair* between 1998 and 2001. Included amongst these are his own 'untimely reflections' upon 11 September which were rejected by both *Vanity Fair* and *The Nation*, a journal on which he serves as a contributing editor. Ironically, when these thoughts were published outside America they were swiftly translated into a dozen languages and became a bestseller. Vidal notes a similar incident occurred during the course of a live talk-show, ABC's *Good Morning America*, when he sought to explain why Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, had committed his infamous atrocity. As he wryly reflects, when he committed the cardinal sin of mentioning that, in large measure, the bombing was provoked by the murderous siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, the largest massacre of civilians by the Federal government since Wounded Knee in 1870, ABC pulled the plug mid sentence.

Yet, as *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* cogently argues, this unedifying treatment is symptomatic of a far broader critical malaise within the mainstream media. Indeed, in the aftermath of 11 September George W. Bush moved to stifle dissent with the positively Procrustean pronouncement that 'either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.' There can be no middle way, for criticism is 'unpatriotic'. Men like McVeigh and bin Laden are 'evil doers' pure and simple. Their deeds the result of 'motiveless malignancy.' The result is a fundamentalist and Manichaeic division between good and evil; right and wrong. However, outrage, whilst perfectly understandable, does not help one to comprehend the difficult and frequently unasked question; why? As Vidal notes, 'things just happen out there in the American media, and we consumers don't need to be told of the why of anything.' However, anyone with even the faintest acquaintance with the semiotics of terrorism can easily begin to comprehend the why and wherefore. Dates, after all, are pregnant with meaning. When all the rationale for the attack is stripped away it remains a cold fact that the World Trade Centre was prophetically destroyed on a Tuesday; Allah created darkness on a Tuesday. The Oklahoma bombing took place on 19 April 1995, the second anniversary of the assault on the Branch Davidians and the day McVeigh's idol, white supremacist Richard Snell, was executed. Such harmonious alignments are unlikely to be the result of random coincidence. Both bin Laden and McVeigh used terrorism in its purest form; violence as communication. As McVeigh's prison psychiatrist noted, McVeigh did not do what he did 'because he was deranged, but because he was serious.' Yet for having the temerity to suggest that McVeigh had 'an

exaggerated sense of justice' Vidal has been howled down in the media and denounced as an apologist for terrorism and mass murder.

The centrepiece of *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* is an article entitled 'The Shredding of the Bill of Rights,' a scathing indictment of the almost daily brutal and flagrant violation of the articles of the American Constitution conducted by a legion of state-sponsored paramilitary units, the Inland Revenue Service and employers. However, as Vidal deftly illustrates, this sustained assault on personal liberty, sanctified by the attendant hysteria surrounding the war on terrorism/drugs, increased its momentum under the Clinton administration. Here is the nebulous logic encapsulated by *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, a phrase Vidal borrows from American historian Charles Bread.

By way of illustration Vidal cites two examples, neither of them popular with the Anglo-American liberal intelligentsia because its victims were members of the farther shores of American politics: the lethal siege on Ruby Ridge which ended in an Orwellian 'rescue' by death for the Weaver family, and the destruction of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Whilst the latter is seen as a catalyst for McVeigh's actions, Vidal's astute analysis offers a more nuanced understanding of the principles of cause and effect which locates the Oklahoma bombing and the siege at Ruby Ridge within the context of rural rage and frustration felt throughout the American mid-West as it is plundered by vast agri-combines. Oklahoma was but one example of this bitter harvest. When it appeared in *Vanity Fair* in November 1998, 'The Shredding of the Bill of Rights' was read by McVeigh himself who subsequently wrote to Vidal, spawning an irregular two and a half year correspondence, (much of it reproduced in the book), which culminated with an invitation to Vidal to witness his 'federally assisted suicide.'

Like many other commentators Vidal remains ambivalent about McVeigh's assumption of the sole guilt for the Oklahoma bombing which many continue to consider a collective endeavour. Whatever the merits of this argument, and Vidal believes there are enough inconsistencies to warrant a judicial review of the case, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* offers a powerful and timely corrective to the resurrection of the completely discredited 'Iraqi connection' conspiracy theories, ('conspiracy' in the pejorative sense of the word), currently being peddled by such senior figures in the American administration as Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz who have publicly stated, without a shred of evidence, that Iraq was behind both the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre and the Oklahoma City bombing.

Whilst he had initially maintained a disinterested stance towards the media circus surrounding McVeigh's trial, Vidal became captivated by its climax. After being found guilty McVeigh was invited to instruct the court whereupon he committed sacrilege by quoting from the famous dissent by Supreme Court Judge Brandeis: 'Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or ill, it teaches the people by its example.' Failing to draw the obvious conclusion, the court then sentenced McVeigh to death. However, as Vidal notes, McVeigh omitted to finish the dissent. Brandeis continued, 'Crime is contagious. If the government becomes the law breaker, it breeds contempt for laws; it invites

every man to become a law unto himself.’ Such a morally bankrupt administration, concluded Brandeis, ‘would bring terrible retribution.’ As *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* demonstrates, if powerful voices such as Vidal’s continue to be sidelined, it still might.

Graham Macklin

## Long John Dubya

Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New*, Pluto Press, 2002, hardback ISBN 07453 1981 5 £40, paperback ISBN 07453 19807 £12.99

St Augustine tells the story of a pirate captured by Alexander the Great, who asked him how he dare molest the sea. ‘How dare you molest the whole world?’ the pirate replied. ‘Because I do it with a little ship only, I am called a thief. You, doing it with a great navy, are called an emperor.’

Thus begins Noam Chomsky’s latest broadside against the misuse of American power. With the ‘war on terror’ about to enter a new phase of violence, this is a timely updated version of his earlier dissection of the first war against terrorism, instigated by Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s. Though the rhetoric was the same in many respects, the political and historical context was very different. When the Republican administration came to power in 1981, the United States was facing serious reverses in parts of the globe. In Iran, the Shah had been overthrown, and the long hostage drama in Tehran added to the humiliation of losing a key ally in the region. Across the Middle East, Islamic radicalism was beginning to replace secular Arab nationalism inspired by the success of the Iranian revolution and the anti-Russian jihad in Afghanistan. In Central America the *Sandinista* revolution had raised hopes of sweeping social and political changes throughout the region.

The Reagan administration came to power determined to re-assert American power and reverse these gains wherever possible, using the threat of ‘international terrorism’ as the ideological justification for a massive rearmament programme. This was the era of Claire Sterling and the ‘terror network’ school of terrorism studies, in which any act of violence against the United States and its allies was part of a conspiracy to de-stabilise ‘freedom-loving democracies.’ Then, as now, the ‘terrorist’ term functioned less as a semantic definition than a propagandistic tool intended to de-legitimise any violence directed against the allies of the United States. Thus, in Latin America, the *Sandinistas* and the Castro regime were deemed to be ‘sponsors of terrorism’ because they supported revolutionary movements in the region, while the murderous armies and death squads who slaughtered thousands in Guatemala and El Salvador became allies in the defence of democracy and western civilisation, and the US-backed Contras who de-stabilised Nicaragua through a systematic policy of atrocity and sabotage were described as ‘the ‘moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers.’

In the Middle East the main objects of the Empire's wrath were Colonel Gadhafi, the Palestinians and the Shiite resistance to Israel in South Lebanon. From the point of view of Reagan and his hawkish ideologues, some of who have lately come back to haunt us once again, these disparate strands were all part of the SMERSH-like terror apparatus supposedly co-ordinated by the Soviet Union. Despite the massive arms build-up and the shrill anti-Soviet rhetoric, the possibility of a nuclear confrontation precluded the kind of large scale military operations that we have seen since 1989. Instead, the war on terrorism was fought mostly by proxy, with direct interventions limited to short retaliatory skirmishes such as the bombing of Tripoli.

All this is laid out in grim detail with Chomsky's characteristic rigour, from the destabilisation of Nicaragua to the United States-Israel partnership. He is particularly good on Israel, unstitching the endless hypocrisy by which Zionist violence is described as 'retaliatory' or 'pre-emptive'. Some of the arguments he makes will be familiar to his readers: the subservience of the mainstream media to United States power, the intellectual dishonesty of much academic scholarship, the double standards behind establishment definitions of terrorism. But the inclusion of old essays on the bombing of Tripoli and the nefarious United States role in the Middle East still make compelling reading in the context of the new war on terror.

One of the striking aspects of Chomsky's analysis is the fact that most, if not all of his arguments are supported by facts available to any other journalist. Yet he is almost alone in the conclusions he reaches; namely that the United States is an aggressive imperial power that has not only supported terrorist movements across the world, but has systematically engaged in terrorist acts of violence itself. Such arguments have always been anathema in polite political discourse, and since September 11<sup>th</sup> the inane epithet 'anti-American' has been liberally applied to anyone who uses them. This is not a label that can be easily used against Chomsky, whose courageous and virtually single-handed critique of United States foreign policy continues to reveal much mainstream political commentary for the vacuous establishment chatter that it is.

*Matt Carr*

## **First in the Time Team**

**V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself*, Spokesman Books, 2003, 244 pages, ISBN 0 85124 649 4, £15, New Thinker's Library no.2**

Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957) is probably the most well known, widely read and influential archaeologist of the twentieth century. Where reputations and arguments often have a shelf life no longer than a television series, his work still lies at the heart of debate within both academic and broader circles. Translated

into dozens of languages, many of his books remain relevant and highly influential nearly half a century after his death.

Anything more than a sketch of such a remarkable career is beyond the scope of this review. Yet even a sketch demonstrates a quality to Childe that is altogether rare in academic circles. Over a period of around thirty five years, he produced books which dealt with a wide range of topics: the prehistory of Europe and the Near East; the evolution of complex societies; and the basic philosophical problems that all archaeologists and historians face. All received thorough and lucid exploration, establishing themes that he returned to again and again throughout his life. At the same time, Childe seldom lost sight of the world in which he lived and the responsibilities that this created for the (pre)historian. A committed socialist, he wrote about the present as well as the past, seeing his academic research as an arena in which contemporary political arguments found a necessary and powerful expression. He also found time to write directly about and be actively involved in the politics of his day.

Childe's career is a valuable index of some of the most important changes in archaeological perspectives over the course of the twentieth century – developments in which his own contribution was frequently crucial. Raised and educated in Australia, where the foundations for his politics were firmly laid, he was in the vanguard of archaeologists who rejected the crude evolutionism of nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship in favour of what came to be known as Culture History. Prompted by a view of societies as inherently conservative, he argued that specific cultures could be identified archaeologically by virtue of the fact that shared cultural traditions would tend to be manifest in material form – in artefacts, architecture and so on. To this idea, Childe and others attached an interest in diffusion; that ideas, materials, innovations and people could move from one setting to another, providing the stimulus for social change. Though he modified his thinking over the years, the principles of culture history remained influential in his work. The development of these arguments, and the rejection of the crude abstraction and inherent racism of earlier traditions of enquiry, can be traced in some of his earliest books, such as *The Dawn of European Civilisation* (1925) and *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929).

As his thinking progressed, Childe began to place more of an emphasis upon economy, on the nature of subsistence in past societies, and the ways in which this was organised in socio-political terms. In this, he moved in step with broader developments in the historical social sciences, seeing this as a way of going beyond some of the shortcomings of culture history. It was with this shift of perspective that he came to regard one development in particular – the adoption of agriculture – as one of the most important watersheds in European prehistory, an argument that he developed in *The Most Ancient East* (1928). In his view, one still held widely today, the adoption of domesticated plants and animals in various ways laid the foundations for new forms of settlement and new forms of social organisation in different regions. Hand in hand with this development

came a more pronounced concern with characterising particular societies in terms of their productive technologies. Childe argued that technical innovation was often an important stimulus for social change; encouraging new forms of production and trade and/or new levels of productivity. These, in their turn, encouraged increases in population, and changes in the institutions and structures of society. In *The Bronze Age* (1930), for example, he suggested that the introduction of metals and the control of metalworking knowledge established forms of demand for wealth items and tools that could only be met by extensive networks of trade and communication between hitherto independent groups. In these respects, Childe was one of the most important early advocates of Materialist perspectives on the European past.

Behind these early books lay a remarkable grasp of the material evidence for past societies across a vast geographic area. Both before and after he took the Abercromby Chair in Archaeology at Edinburgh (1927), Childe travelled widely and studied collections in European and Near Eastern Institutions. These visits established personal contacts in many countries, and knowledge of assemblages and sequences from a startling array of sites. They also meant that he was particularly well placed to observe many of the cultural and political movements that prefigured the build up to the Second World War. It was against this background that he used archaeological evidence and the idea of diffusion to criticise the empirical and intellectual foundations of Nazi uses of archaeology.

Most commentators would agree that a significant watershed in Childe's career was his first visit to the Soviet Union in 1935. Here he came into contact with archaeologists engaged in the rewriting of prehistory in line with the principles of Marxist thought, working within a framework that we recognise as Historical Materialism. Childe evidently found much to agree and disagree with in these encounters. He was openly critical of the simplistic evolutionary schemes favoured by Soviet academics, in which the development of societies through various archetypal stages was a singular and inevitable process. In his view, archaeological evidence itself demonstrated important historical variations in the ways in which different societies changed over time in different regions of Europe and the Near East. That said, there was also a good deal that echoed and extended his own thinking; from the broader political context of academic labour to the specific concern with past economies and social organisation. Particularly important was the emphasis upon explaining social change in the past as a consequence of conflicts of interest or contradictions *within* society. Most commonly identified in the tensions that emerged between classes, these contradictions provided the stimulus for a transformation of social structures. Put simply, they drove the historical process. These shifts in thinking stimulated shifts in archaeological practice. The concerns of historical materialism meant that evidence had to be studied to establish as much as possible about the nature of production, social organisation, and even ideology in the past. This meant excavating the everyday as well as the spectacular. This was something that Childe himself had sought to achieve in much of his fieldwork in Scotland, most

notably in his excavations at the Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae on Orkney; one of the first studies of the social dimensions of domestic space in prehistory.

Work in the Soviet Union also encouraged Childe to think more critically about processes of cultural evolution, a concern reflected in two of his most widely read books: *Man Makes Himself* (1936) and *What Happened in History* (1942). Both were written (very successfully) for a broad audience, and demonstrate the importance Childe attached to the dissemination of ideas and the encouragement of debate; something we would do well to remember today. Both also sought to explore the conditions that gave rise to changes in the nature of societies over time. How did the historical development of what he called scientific or technical knowledge allow for the more effective control and appropriation of natural resources? How did these developments, in their turn, prompt changes in the ways in which societies were organised? What consequences flowed from the adoption of agriculture or metalworking, the development of literacy or new systems of measurement? Childe developed a loose analogy between processes of biological and social evolution, in which these and other innovations had a direct bearing on how past societies adapted to particular environmental circumstances, at the same time establishing the base from which new forms of society could emerge. Here was a basis for generalisation and a theoretical framework for understanding long term processes of change. But throughout, Childe also stressed that any generalisations or comparisons we might make could not override a concern with history, with the particular conditions of context, belief systems and politics which made one society different from another.

Above all else, *Man Makes Himself*, like a good deal of his later work, reveals Childe's faith in a sense of human progress. This optimism was severely tested by the events of the Second World War and the corruption of ideals by totalitarian and other authoritarian regimes. Yet it is clear that whatever dissatisfaction he may have felt with his own work, Childe remained convinced that the study of the past, amongst other things, remained a powerful arena for debating the present and anticipating the future. The balance of these concerns, and the utility of Marxist concepts for our understanding of prehistory, would remain as central themes in much of Childe's later work; in books such as *History* (1947), *Social Evolution* (1951), and *Society and Knowledge* (1956). These and other studies were published during his tenure as Director of the Institute of Archaeology in London (1946-1956). After this, he returned to Australia and it was there that he met his death on Govett's Leap in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales.

Hindsight is a curious perspective. It grants us a privileged vantage and perhaps an unfair advantage over earlier scholars. Some of the chronologies developed by Childe and others have been independently overturned by techniques such as Radiocarbon (C14) dating, a development that Childe himself anticipated. We also have the benefit of being able to draw upon evidence collected from systematic excavations throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Inevitably, this allows us to correct or even reject some of the details of earlier

accounts. More broadly, our perspectives have changed. We are now reluctant to equate specific material or architectural traditions with distinct ‘cultures’, recognising that the relationship between material tradition and identity is more complex than was once supposed. Moreover, we now operate in a world in which the certainties of scientific objectivism and a faith in progress have increasingly come under fire. Despite this, Childe’s work and influence remains. We are still trying to find a path that reconciles broad generalisations with the particular details of specific historical sequences. The legacy of Marxist perspectives is still strong. It still matters that we argue about the relationship between identity and material tradition, between individuals and the institutions that make up societies. In this, we are adding to debates about human social life that Childe helped to initiate. And it remains as important, if not more important, that we argue about how power operates in the present as well as the past, how it acts upon, and may at times be influenced by, our work. Given both the content and conduct of his work, Childe remains an important voice in the twenty-first century.

*Mark Edmonds*

## **Eric, or Little by Little**

**Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*, Allen Lane, 2002, pp.448, ISBN 0 713 99581 5, £25**

This is Eric Hobsbawm’s autobiography. One has to know the origin of the title in the Chinese saying to realise that this is a history of what he describes as ‘the most extraordinary and terrible century in history’. The book has to be read alongside the fourth volume of Eric Hobsbawm’s modern history, entitled *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, (Michael Joseph 1994, pp.627) and the subsequent, *The New Century*, an interview with Antonio Polito (Little Brown, 2000, pp.176).

When I reviewed *Age of Extremes* (*European Labour Forum*, no. 16, New Year 1996), I was exceptionally critical. This was on three main grounds. The ‘Extremes’ were the contrasting “Golden Age” of 1948-73, and the ‘Age of Catastrophe’ and the ‘Landslide’, the one preceding and the other following. I found the contrasts excessive and undialectical, concealing what William Morris called ‘the change beyond the change’. I questioned, further, the claim that the years from 1945 to 1990 comprised ‘the most dramatic, rapid and profound revolution in human affairs of which history has record’ and the categorisation of social breakdown, ‘a world going to pieces’, that followed these years. Most importantly, I challenged the assumption that there were no alternatives to the command economy on the one hand and, on the other, the free market, which Hobsbawm maintained ‘the ‘Golden Age’ had democratised’. I pointed to the alternative economic programmes, based upon workers’ control within



democratically planned parameters, as proposed in Britain from the Institute for Workers' Control, in Tito's Yugoslavia, in the Prague Spring, in Chile under Allende, in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev.

None of these examples gets a mention from Hobsbawm, who tells us that he regards economists as 'a notably contentious tribe' which cannot ever agree among themselves. Kondratiev 'does not help us much'. Lafontaine 'too far left', and what divided Keynesians and neo-liberals was 'a war of incompatible ideologies...barely accessible to argument'. Moreover, he sees 'the historian's world as what happened and not what might have happened if things had been different.' In looking forward, however, rather gloomily into the future, he puts what little hope he has left in the neutral and technical authority of a popular front of sectional pressure groups, what he calls 'plebiscitary democracy'. Many of these thoughts are expressed openly in the autobiography, and it is this fascination with the idea of a popular front that provides the political thread that runs through its pages. 'The complexities of governments', he believes, 'are now beyond the understanding of their citizens' and must be left to the technocrats. This may not seem surprising in someone who became a life-long Communist at the age of 15, and did not leave the Party until it left him. But it does raise some big questions. What can we find from his life to give some clues to explain such views?

The first eighty pages of the book give a very moving account of a boy, born improbably in Egypt of an English father and Austrian mother, growing up in an impoverished Jewish family in Vienna, losing both his parents during his teens, and moving to Berlin in 1931. He found himself in the midst of the coming to power of the Nazis in 1932-3 and joined a Young Communist formation. The Nazis' actual taking of power in Germany did not change the line of the Soviet Communist Party's International (the Comintern), that the Social Democrats were a greater danger than Hitler. This was said to be because they were attracting the workers away from the revolution that was bound to come as the Nazi experiment failed, and the model of the Soviet Union became unstoppable. Hobsbawm along with his young recruits to the Party did not question the line then, but he did thereafter as the Nazis established their power with all the violence of which they were capable with concentration camps for the dissidents. By this time his uncle and aunt had brought Eric and his sister to England. The Soviet Union remained for him the great hope for mankind, but could not unity on the left have saved them in Germany?

Some of my criticism of this autobiography may seem to be personal. I will refer to the author as Eric, and I will try to explain the reasons for my criticisms. In 1936, Eric joined the British Communist Party. He is a few months older than I am and in that year went from St Marylebone Grammar School on a scholarship up to Cambridge, just a year before I went up to Oxford. He was already a Marxist. I was a Quaker. Eric writes that he 'belongs to the era of anti-fascism and popular front', but although on holiday in France he visited the Spanish frontier, he did not join the International Brigade. He does not explain why, but it may be that the Party did not want its few precious intellectuals to be killed. I

also nearly went to Spain, in my case to drive an ambulance, but was persuaded by my father to take up my scholarship at Oxford. I did not become a Communist until ten years later. Eric and I have very different memories of the 1930s, and developed rather different views about left alliances. Eric found London dull and uninspiring, much less fun than Berlin or Vienna, and Cambridge disappointing, although he was elected to the 'Apostles'. This was after the famous Cambridge spies had left that coterie, but Eric confesses that he would have spied if that was what the Party had required of him.

By contrast, I found the London I visited just wonderful and Oxford all absorbing. This was partly because I enjoyed sports as well as studying, partly because I was finding my way slowly through the Quaker/pacifist/Independent Labour Party (ILP) convictions of my father and his Labour and Liberal friends. At Oxford Roy Harrod was introducing us to Keynes, who had just published his *General Theory* challenging accepted neo-liberal economics, GDH Cole was advocating industrial democracy, and Freddie Ayer was questioning the basis of metaphysics in argument with Collingwood. Auden and Day Lewis were reciting their poems. When I went up to London there were wonderful concerts, new work from Britten and Vaughan Williams, the new documentary films and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) annual ball with beautiful girls.

During the war Eric's knowledge of Germany was stupidly rejected by the authorities for intelligence work on political grounds. He joined the sappers building defences against an invasion that did not happen, was transferred to the Army Education Corps and was kept in the United Kingdom. He describes poignantly his horror at realising after Dunkirk that Britain was actually alone and his intense relief as the German armies, having been thrown into invading the Soviet Union, were held and repulsed at Stalingrad. I shared that relief, but by contrast I had an interesting war, in an ambulance unit in the London blitz and then in North Africa, and after that with the Yugoslav Partisans in camps in Egypt and Italy, and finally in Yugoslavia itself as it was liberated by Tito's Partisan armies from the Germans and their allies. It was that experience that led me to join Eric in the British Communist Party, delighted at Labour's victory in 1945, with strong doubts about any alliances with Liberals.

### **The Cold War**

In the decades after 1945, in spite of our common membership of the Communist Party, in my case only until 1957, Eric's and my experience of the Cold War years was very different. Eric was active in university circles, in Cambridge and then in London, and most particularly in the Communist Party Historians' Group. I became a member of the Party's Economic Committee and wrote for *Labour Research*, a Communist front organisation, but I was active with my wife in a local branch of the Party in Essex, speaking at street meetings against the Korean War, United States bombers in East Anglia and German rearmament. While Eric was being excluded from university posts, I did not even try for them, but lectured for the Workers' Educational Association. In his autobiography Eric

describes the impact on him of his first visit, in 1954-5, to the Soviet Union with the Communist Party Historians. He came away, he says, depressed at the lack of all basic resources and at the 'paranoiac fear of espionage [that] turned the information needed for every day life into a state secret'. This is not what I remember him saying when he reported back to a Party meeting in our garden in Essex. I can only recall being inspired by his stories of new buildings, theatres and opera houses, widespread literacy and books published in millions of copies.

The gap between us was to be opened up much wider after Khrushchev's revelations, made public in 1956, of the terror under Stalin. I left the Communist Party after trying with some of Eric's Historians' Group to convert the Party into a pluralist organisation. Eric stayed on right to the bitter end, in 1991. Much of the central chapters of his autobiography are concerned with his reasons for so doing. These start with his early faith in the Soviet Union, sense of loyalty to old comrades and refusal to join the anti-Communists, but go on to include what he calls his 'pride' and desire to avoid any advantages that renegeing might give him. He nonetheless got his readership in 1959 and his chair shortly afterwards, and went to the United States as a visiting professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1967, at a time when entry to the United States was difficult even for ex-Communists. (I was turned down, as late as 1974).

To try to understand his story, I shall compare it once again with my own experience. Eleanor, my wife, and I left the Party in 1957, not just because of the revelations of Stalin's terror, which had been concealed from us, but for three other reasons. The first had started with Khrushchev's greeting of Tito at Belgrade airport in 1955 with the words 'It was all Beria's fault'. We had spent the years 1944-47 in Yugoslavia and had most unhappily accepted the Party line against Tito in 1948, as laid down by my erstwhile war-time colleague, James Klugman, in his book *From Trotsky to Tito*. I went to see James in 1955, to ask what Khrushchev meant by 'all'. 'Did that include all the East European trials?' I wanted to know. I was told to keep my mouth shut. Eric maintains that Klugman was 'forced' to renege on Tito and that the experience 'broke him', and left him with the unimportant role of Party Education Secretary and official historian. Neither in his teaching nor in his history did James seem to me at all a 'broken' man in the years from 1948 to 1957, and after that I didn't see him.

The second reason for our dissatisfaction with the British Communist Party was its support for the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolt, which seems not to have disturbed Eric too much, and it is clear from what he writes that all his academic friends in Budapest survived. Our third and most serious ground for leaving the Party was the policy of the Party towards nuclear arms and its support for the 'people's bomb'. We regarded this as quite unacceptable, and actively demonstrated against United States bombers in East Anglia and then joined CND marches. Eric calls CND 'the most important movement of the post-1945 British left' and records that he sat down in a CND protest with Bertrand Russell in 1961, but argues that CND 'was not intended to, and plainly could not, affect the USA's and USSR's nuclear arms race', but was about 'setting a good moral example to

the world... keeping out of the Cold War or, perhaps more exactly, about getting Britain used to no longer being a great power and a global empire.' I would say that most CND supporters did actually believe that unilateralism would have a wider effect, and had no lingering interest in Britain's power and empire.

The biggest difference between Eric and me was in relation to the New Left. He states categorically that the 'founding of CND about the same time (1958) had nothing to do with the crisis in the Communist Party' and is totally dismissive of the 'New Lefts', as he calls them, who, he says, produced 'no lasting new organisations of significance'. He concedes that *New Left Review* has survived, but attributes that, quite rightly, to the money and editorship of Perry Anderson after the first 14 issues. Although he claims to have retained his friendships with the historians who left the Party, he is sharply critical of the work of both Edward Thompson and Ralph Samuel. He is particularly scathing about the Partisan coffee shop in Soho for which Ralph Samuel miraculously found the capital. Eric became briefly a director and confides that the money came mainly from rich Jewish ex-Communist Party members or supporters. The shop was designed to provide a meeting place and offices for the New Left and hopefully to help finance activities. Ralph was not a born manager and the coffee shop failed within two years. Many New Left groups were, however, established throughout the country. The New Left, moreover, as I saw it, provided most of the thought behind the launching of CND, and it was mainly from New Left groups that CND branches emerged in the following years.

Eric looking back says that he is 'surprised how little direct political activity there was in my life after 1956, considering my reputation as a committed Marxist'. He called himself a 'watcher in politics' and gave his attention to writing. His invaluable books on Nineteenth Century wage earners, his studies of nationalism, his *Industry and Empire* and the first volume of his modern history, *The Age of Revolution*, date from the 1960s, as do his visits to the United States. He says that he decided not to write then about the Twentieth Century because it involved too closely his own commitment. He regarded the students in revolt in 1968 as hopeless anarchists and romantics, happily avoided an occupation at Birkbeck, but much admired the rising feminist movement, in particular in the person of one of his own students, Sheila Rowbotham, with their message that 'the personal is political'. He does not revert to the exaggerated language which he used in *Age of Extremes* to describe the years from 1945-90 as 'the most dramatic, rapid and profound revolution in human affairs of which history has record.' In the autobiography he sees a social revolution, particularly in the position of women, and in effect a political and moral counter-revolution following Mrs Thatcher's election in 1979, when greed and sex came to dominate public discourse.

### **The Struggle for the Soul of the Labour Party**

Much is made by Eric of the warnings he issued in the late 1970s about the threat to Labour, particularly in an article he wrote in 1978 in *Marxism Today*, under

the title of 'The Forward March of Labour Halted'. He does not mention, though he may not have known it at the time, as it was subsequently revealed, that *Marxism Today* was being subsidised from Moscow. Eric warned that after the 'apparently irresistible though not continuous rise of the British labour movement in the first half of the century', changes in the economy had left its base in the industrial proletariat both 'diminished and divided'. The date of this essay is important. On Eric's categorisation of ages, the 'Golden Age' had ended with the oil price hike of 1973-4. The Labour Party was in government and suffering from serious internal disagreement on industrial problems and in particular on wages policy, which ended with the 'winter of discontent' and defeat at the hand of Mrs Thatcher in the general election of 1979. In 1980, the Party came under the leadership of the old left-winger Michael Foot, who had one abiding passion, his belief in nuclear disarmament which took him to the revival of the earlier CND demonstrations, made once more urgent by the deployment in the United Kingdom of American missiles.

Despite Eric's previous enthusiasm for CND, he came to regard the Labour Party under Foot's leadership as a 'mixed minority of sectarian left-wingers' who then, in his view, 'almost destroyed the Labour Party'. 'In the end', according to Eric, 'it [the Labour Party] was saved, but only just, at the Labour Conference in 1981, when Tony Benn stood for the deputy leadership of the Party and was defeated in a photo-finish by Denis Healey'. By that time, the 'Gang of Four' had left the Labour Party to form the Social Democratic Party and make alliance with the Liberals. Although many one-time Labour members, including 27 MPs, only joined the new party after the 1981 Conference, discussions about a break-away had been going on for some time. Eric recalls a dinner with Amartya Sen in 1980, at which Bill Rodgers arrived late from drafting the 'Limehouse declaration' that founded the new party. The division in the Labour Party made almost certain its defeat in 1983, but by then Eric was regarding it as a 'remaining rump struggling to survive'.

'The future of the Labour Party,' Eric goes on, 'was not certain until after the disastrous election of 1983, when Michael Foot ... was succeeded by Neil Kinnock', who had Eric's strong support against the 'sectarians'. He proudly recalls meeting Kinnock, who came to a Party Conference fringe meeting where Eric was speaking, and getting him to sign 'with warm thanks' the book that was based on the *Marxism Today* article and had been published in 1981 with other contributions. Eric's political position in relation to the Labour Party went back to his criticism of the British Communist leadership in the 1970s. Eric had by this time espoused the Italian version of Euro-Communism, with its belief in some kind of centre-left unity, and was sharply critical of the British Communists' policy in the unions.

Eric writes at length most critically about the success of the trade union leaders 'marshalled by Bert Ramelson and Ken Gill', both leading Communist Party members of a non-Euro persuasion, in opposing any form of 'wages policy' in the Labour Governments of Wilson and Callaghan in the 1970s. Such

opposition was in Eric's view the cause of Labour's downfall. He sees Jack Jones of the Transport Workers and Hugh Scanlon of the Engineers as half-willing dupes of the Communists. They were nothing of the sort. They were much closer to the Institute for Workers' Control, whose conferences Scanlon spoke at, and favoured wages policies which gave workers a fair bargain and not the thick end of the employers' stick. Tony Benn, who also supported measures of industrial democracy, lost the vote for the deputy leadership because on the issue of a minimum wage he followed Ken Gill to oppose it, and thereby failed to win the crucial support of the low-paid public sector workers.

Eric maintains that 'the traditional Labour left, always present and significant in the party's history, though rarely decisive, disappeared from sight after 1983. It no longer exists,' he adds. His argument was based on votes at general elections, but union membership continued to rise after the Thatcher victory in 1979, and so did support for Labour in local government, especially in the Greater London Council and other big metropolitan authorities in the North of England. This trend was only brought to an end after years of high unemployment – from 1984 to 1987, over 3 million even on the Government's claimant count – and after Thatcher's offensive against the unions and against local government began to have their effect. But it has to be said that Eric and the influence of *Marxism Today* did much to undermine the traditional Labour left. Kinnock was Michael Foot's chosen successor both in his constituency and as leader of the Labour Party and for a time upheld its unilateralist policy on nuclear weapons. Eric makes no mention of this and it was evidently not his reason for supporting Kinnock. 'After 1985', Eric writes, 'when he [Kinnock] secured the expulsion of the 'Militant Tendency' from the Party, its future was safe.'

Kinnock had been moving steadily to the right, withdrawing support from the striking miners in a famous conference stand-up with Arthur Scargill. The strike collapsed under Thatcher's vicious attacks. Kinnock was nonetheless defeated in the 1987 general election, and thereafter moved even more sharply to the right, abandoning unilateralism, going to the United States to visit President Reagan and encouraging young Labour MPs and media celebrities – Mandelson, Mowlam, Phillips, Paxman, Robertson, Chris Smith and including Eric Hobsbawm's daughter Julia – who had joined with opposite numbers in the United State on Reagan's British-American Project for the Successor Generation. None of this was to help poor Kinnock. He was defeated again in the 1992 general election. About this Eric's comment is mind-boggling for any one like myself of the traditional Labour left, and I quote it in full:

'We wanted a reformed Labour, not Thatcher in trousers. The narrow failure of Labour to win the 1992 election eliminated this prospect. I am not alone in recalling that election night as the saddest and most desperate in my political experience.'

This was the Eric Hobsbawm who had been in Berlin on the night of Hitler's rise to power.

What Eric and his friends in *Marxism Today* got after Kinnock was first John Smith, who sounded like traditional Labour, if not of the left, and was desperately concerned for the unemployed – still around 3 million – and then, when John Smith tragically died, they got Blair. This was the Tony Blair who had been given space to write in *Marxism Today* and who was to recruit to his personal office as Prime Minister some of the brightest of that journal's contributors, and whose rise to power had been prepared by the movement of the Labour Party to the right, to which Eric had been an accessory. And yet, in the very same paragraph from which I have quoted above Eric writes:

'On the other hand, we could not accept – until Tony Blair became leader in 1994 we could barely envisage – the alternative of "New Labour", which accepted the logic as well as the practical results of Thatcherism, and deliberately abandoned everything that might remind the decisive middle class voters of workers, trade unions, publicly owned industries, social justice, equality, let alone socialism.'

When Eric joined with others to revive *Marxism Today* for a single issue 18 months after Blair and New Labour came to power, Eric writes of this exercise:

'We criticised New Labour not because it had accepted the realities of living in a capitalist society, but for accepting too much of the ideological assumption which destroys the foundations of all political movements for improving the condition of the people, and with them therefore the justification of all Labour governments, namely that the efficient conduct of a society's affairs can only be the search for personal advantage i.e. behaving like businessmen.'

How could Eric not have seen that this was the ideological assumption from the very start of the Blair project? It was blindingly clear to Ken Coates and myself, when two years before Blair came to power we detected this ideological switch in New Labour towards making Labour the 'party of business' and wrote about it in our book *The Blair Revelation: Deliverance for Whom?* in response to Liddle and Mandelson, *The Blair Revolution: Can it Deliver?*

### **The Destruction of the Soviet Union**

In dealing with the death of Soviet socialism, Eric writes that when Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, 'In spite of everything, he seemed to represent our kind of socialism – indeed to judge by early statements, the sort of communism represented by the Italians or the 'socialism with a human face' of the Prague Spring – which we had thought almost extinct there.' Moreover, Gorbachev had been, Eric goes on, 'almost singlehandedly responsible for ending half a century of nightmare of nuclear world war and, in Eastern Europe, for the decision to let go of the USSR's satellite states. It was he who, in effect, tore down the Berlin wall.' I and many, many others certainly shared Eric's relief at this ending of the nuclear threat and of the isolation of Eastern Europe. But what was left behind in the Soviet Union and the satellite states and what was to follow seemed to us much less reassuring than Eric suggests.

Eric goes on to write: ‘Curiously, our admiration was not to be significantly diminished by the tragedy of his [Gorbachev’s] dramatic failure inside the Soviet Union, which was almost total. More than any other single man, he became responsible for destroying it.’ Eric’s complaint is that Gorbachev ‘and his fellow reformers were too foolhardy or, if one prefers, neither big nor knowledgeable enough about the nature of the world to know quite what they were doing’. Writing from Helsinki and observing the Soviet collapse from close quarters, Eric could recognise what he called ‘the disastrous blindness of the western economists who passed through’ [Helsinki, *en route* for Russia] but could say of ‘the 1991 failed coup that ended the Gorbachev era’: ‘he [Gorbachev] chose *glasnost* in order to force *perestroika*; it should have been the other way round. And neither Marxism nor western economists had either experience or theory that helped.’

This needs careful unravelling. Knowledge of the ‘nature of the world’ would have told Gorbachev that the West would intervene with every dirty means in a more open political regime, using a Yeltsin as their pawn, to destabilise the Soviet Union. What Eric is saying is that Gorbachev should not have abandoned, in 1989, the last of the Five Year Plans in mid-course, should have forced through his economic reforms (*perestroika*) by stealth, and only later come into the open (*glasnost*). But this hardly begins to recognise the dire crisis in which the Soviet Union and its satellites were enveloped. In *Age of Extremes* Eric had exposed all the weaknesses of a command system, when the central command is withdrawn. He had emphasised the losses involved in the war in Afghanistan from which Gorbachev withdrew. Educating the Soviet public to defend economic reform was certainly a high risk strategy in the circumstances, but what I complained about in Eric’s treatment of Gorbachev, in my review of his *Age of Extremes*, was that he had no faith in, or understanding of, the economic alternatives being proposed in *perestroika* and makes no mention of Gorbachev’s economic adviser. This was Abel Aganbegyan, who came in 1988 to England under Teodor Shanin’s auspices to introduce the English translation of his book, *The Challenge: Economics of Perestroika*. Eric must surely have heard of him. And I added at the end of my review in relation to Eric’s professed preference for ‘strong, neutral and technical authority in government’ and his fear of the ‘virus of democracy’ that it was perhaps what Eric liked in the Communist Party and its Popular Fronts, that the Party technocrats could lead while giving the fellow travellers the illusion of participation.

### On Judging EJH

Perry Anderson, a close friend and colleague of Eric Hobsbawm, reviewed *Interesting Times* in the *London Review of Books* under the heading of ‘The Age of EJH’, and there is a sense in which Eric’s last books coming on top of his Nineteenth Century histories have caught the imagination of a certain reading public, to make them think about their own political lives. He calls *Interesting Times* the ‘flip side’ of *Age of Extremes* and one expects from an autobiography



of a writer of Eric's stature to gain some new insights into one's own experience. For me there was a particularly high expectation. As I have said, Eric and I are the same age and have travelled part of life's journey in company. In the end, I am left with a disquieting list of queries, to which I still do not know the answers. Why after 1957, apart from some brief activity in CND in 1961, did he become, although still a Communist, what he calls a 'watcher in politics'? Why on returning to politics in the 1980s did he do so to back Kinnock against the traditional Labour left, especially in 1992, when Kinnock had abandoned all traditional Labour values, including nuclear disarmament? How could he believe that Tony Blair would not move in directions which Eric now deplors?

There are even more difficult questions to be answered in relation to the world events, within which our lives have been lived through the last century and beyond. How did Eric really view the USSR, for many years idolised, a view shared by me for some time, but regarded in hindsight by Eric as 'bound to fail from the start'? He never mentions the Moscow Trials on the one hand or on the other the changes that Khrushchev made after 1960, emptying the Gulag and reforming the economy. How does he explain the booms and slumps which divide up his several ages? He attributes them to Kondratiev swings, but says Kondratiev did not understand what caused them. How, after a lifetime studying Marx and as joint editor of the Marx-Engels collected works, did he imagine that the alliance of capital and labour could be a possibility in a Popular Front or in New Labour? How while following events in the Soviet Union from Helsinki could he think it possible to understand the failure of Gorbachev without making clear the involvement of outside intervention? How does he explain in France and Spain and Italy, countries he knew well, the failure of the Left to maintain itself in power in the last two decades? Why does he think in Latin America, where he studied for several years, that the example of Cuba was not copied?

I cannot pretend to answer all my own queries, but I think that I have some clues in what Eric has revealed in the autobiography. The first is that, despite a very happy second marriage, Eric comes through as a very lonely man. This is an inevitable part of the life of a scholar, chained to his books and resources in libraries, finding his recreation in listening to jazz and going for long walks in the mountains. But in Eric's case it was obviously exaggerated by his being an orphan from the age of 12, an *émigré* from the Austria and Germany of his teens, a Communist in a very conservative 1930s England, treated as an alien in the War, a pariah in post-war academia, choosing to remain a Communist when his friends left the Party.

I think that there is a further clue that has nothing to do with Eric's origins. It happened that he found his main academic home in Birkbeck College, part of London University. Birkbeck is a college that caters primarily for part-time and therefore generally mature students who have already entered the 'world of work.' He expresses great pleasure in the kind of students he found there, many of them from working class origins. Unlike most of his other historian friends he did not teach in the Workers' Educational Association or University Extra-mural

classes, as I did. There is an important difference, or there was until recently. To Birkbeck, as to the Open University, students came as individuals for personal self-improvement. To the Workers' Educational Association and Extra-mural classes they mainly came as a collective from trade unions or community groups whose aim was the advancement of their class. In the army, Eric comments wryly on someone who was committed to the establishment of an ideal workers' state having some difficulty in relating to real workers. He was pleased that he overcame this difficulty, but none of these fellow soldiers had any ideas about collective action to raise the status of their class. Eric's ignorance of the trade unions in the 1960s and 70s shows most woefully in his belief that Jack Jones's wages policies were sectional. The sectional policies were advocated by the Communists, Eric's comrades. Although he disagreed with them he did not dissociate himself from them.

It has to be said that there is a further possible reason for Eric's blindness in failing to see the inevitable results of Kinnock's shift to the right and its Blairite conclusion. This is to be found in the academic élitism that pervades the last third of the book. This consists of chapters on his visits and friendships outside England – in Wales, France, Italy, Spain, the United States and parts of Latin America. These give us very little insight into the political and social development in these countries during the century. They consist of reminiscences of time spent with his friends who were distinguished academics or leading politicians, in the case of Brazil President Cardoso himself, with whom Eric is duly photographed. This is an autobiography and such pleasures are understandably recorded, but a critical reader must find that the constant reference to 'my friend X or Y or Z' begins to pall. Little by little for Eric, the attraction of a certain notoriety, the congratulations of his peers and entrée to the homes of the great and the powerful had perhaps begun to overlay a native socialism. His acceptance of his Companion of Honour (CH) he refers to only obliquely as 'having accepted some of the signs of public recognition because they would have pleased her'[his mother]. She died when he was 13.

Eric's blindness in relation to the United States may have the same origin in the élite world of American academia, which he regards as his 'second home'. In the last chapter of *Interesting Times*, entitled 'From FDR to Bush', he recognises the emergence of a 'single global hyper-power', and the greater danger the United States empire represents, compared with Britain's earlier empire, because of its greater strength. Incredibly, however, he goes on to comment that the 'US does not know what it wants to do with its power.' This was written many years after President Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book *The Grand Chessboard* had explained how 'America had to 'manage' Eurasia' and after President Bush had made it only too clear after September 11, 2001, how this was to be done by 'full spectrum dominance'.

And yet, despite this apparent obliviousness to American designs, Eric can take a different view. In his book *The New Century* he tells his Italian interviewer that he opposed the Gulf War and did not accept the war against Yugoslavia as

having any moral basis, and this is perhaps what he means by saying that the United States does not know what it is doing. That interview ends with Eric expressing the fear that the ‘future is obscure’ for the political parties, newspapers, representative assemblies and states, ‘the political institutions that were the foundation of civilisation.’ ‘That is why’, he concludes, ‘at the end of the century, I cannot look forward to the future with great optimism.’

Eric reveals in his autobiography, then, that he is not only a lonely man, much in need of friendship – aren’t we all? – but an unhappy man. He was obviously happy with his second wife and their children, although it comes as a shock half way through the book to find that he had a son by his first wife. What he reveals all too clearly is his lack of a sense of identity. He calls himself a ‘non-Jewish Jew’. He always insisted that he was not a German or Austrian refugee. He was an Englishman but cosmopolitan, an adopted Italian, a United States professor from England. He was a Communist but not conforming. He was most of the time what he calls a ‘watcher in politics’. When he did intervene it all went wrong. The ending words of *Age of Extremes* were notably gloomy like the ending of *The New Century*. *Interesting Times*, however, ends more hopefully: ‘Still let us not disarm, even in unsatisfactory times. Social injustice still needs to be denounced and fought. The world will not get better on its own.’

Is it too much then that we should now ask Professor Eric Hobsbawm CH to state in the most public way, not in books only, but in the press and on television the conclusions that in various places he has expressed – that ‘the idolatry of market values cannot last’, that ‘Blair is a Thatcher in trousers’, that there was ‘no moral imperative’ for NATO ‘s bombing of Yugoslavia or intervention in Kosovo, and above all to repeat what he said to the Italian journalist: ‘I look forward to an American world empire, whose long-term chances are poor, with more fear and less enthusiasm than I look back on the record of the old British Empire...’ If he could but do that, I would forgive him all that I have said against him in these pages. Of much greater importance, it would have a profoundly beneficial effect, influencing public opinion in Britain and much more widely. How about it , Eric?

*Michael Barratt Brown*

## Counting the Vote

**David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001*, Palgrave, 2002, hardback ISBN 0 333 74032 7 £55, paperback ISBN 0 333 74033 5 £19.99**

This is the sixteenth in David Butler’s series of studies of British general elections. As always, it is packed with statistics, tables and details, providing a mine of information for any student of the British electoral process.

The problem with the 2001 general election for politicians, media and the electorate alike was that it was a complete bore. The result was a foregone conclusion. Both major political parties tightly controlled their media operations, so that the only abiding images of the campaign are two gloriously-unscripted moments: Sharon Storer's waylaying of Blair on the steps of a Birmingham hospital and Prescott's right hook. Above all, the major political parties agreed with each other: on the economy (no increase in income tax levels), on privatisation of public services, on trade unions, on military spending, on Northern Ireland, on criminal justice and on immigration policy. What's more, they also agreed on the issues *not* to discuss: the environment, transport, drugs, freedom of speech barely got a mention on the airwaves. Hardly any wonder, then, that the voters voted with their feet and stayed at home: at 59%, the turnout was the lowest since universal suffrage began.

For Blair, 2001 was an opportunity both to enshrine neo-liberal ideology within the Labour Party and to secure his place in the history books. When I was on Labour's National Executive Committee in 1999/2000, his constant refrain was that no Labour Prime Minister has ever won two full terms. He also used winning a second term to rebuke dissidents. To the Grassroots Alliance, Ken Livingstone, Rhodri Morgan or ordinary Party members who were dissatisfied with New Labour's record, he would insist that if we complained too much, we would jeopardise the next election and put the Tories back in.

In 1997, Blair may have insisted 'we were elected as New Labour and we shall govern as New Labour' but few Labour voters believed him. Voting Labour would sweep away eighteen years of Tory government: favours for big business, tax cuts for the rich, sleaze, privatisation would all disappear. The record of the 1997 – 2001 government, particularly its determination to maintain Tory spending levels, proved those voters wrong, but during the first term, even New Labour was required to implement some decidedly Old Labour promises (the minimum wage, some restoration of trade union and employment rights) which were long-standing Party commitments. Private memos from Blair to his close advisers, in April 2001, confirm that Blair regarded 2001 as the opportunity to claim a mandate for neo-liberal policies. The New Labour manifesto emphasised 'reform of public services' (Blairite speak for privatisation), a punitive approach to criminal justice (so that Straw's successor could point to the manifesto when he chose to abolish trial by jury), scapegoating asylum seekers, and a refusal to increase income tax levels. With the result assured and with no effective opposition, Blair did not need to court the votes of traditional Labour voters. They had nowhere else to go, he calculated. This election would concentrate on deepening New Labour's appeal to 'Middle England' and provide him with a mandate at the same time.

For the Tories, knowing that they would not win, the general election was an ordeal that had to be undergone as quickly and painlessly as possible. The consensus between the major political parties is a disaster for the Tories. They had no 'clear blue water' to distinguish themselves from New Labour. From 1999, realising that their chances of winning the election were hopeless, the Tories began

to concentrate on their core vote. In the absence of any real disagreement over the economy, the Tories concentrated on the euro (which had the advantage of appealing to a xenophobic agenda and of being a traditional Tory preoccupation). Desperately trying to paint Straw as a liberal, the Tories' 'law 'n' order' agenda focussed on support for Tony Martin (the Norfolk farmer who killed a teenage

Meanwhile what about the left? Under first-past-the-post, little attention is paid to minor political parties. There are brief mentions of the Socialist Labour Party, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Socialist Alliance. Martin Harrison, writing the chapter on media coverage, says of the Socialist Alliance's Party Election Broadcast, directed by Ken Loach, 'this could have been a Labour broadcast a decade ago' and describes the Scottish Socialist Party's broadcast (by Peter Mullan and Martin McCardie) as 'the most savage attack' on New Labour. The Green Party and the Scottish Socialist Party each saved ten deposits; the Socialist Alliance saved two and the Socialist Labour Party one. The general election offered no opportunities for any great breakthroughs for the left, although it is worth remembering that the total vote for left parties was higher than at any time since 1951.

There are no easy fixes for the left. Thatcher's insistent 'there is no alternative' is now a New Labour mantra. Blair tells us that the only alternative to him is Iain Duncan-Smith and that there is no alternative to neo-liberal policies. What's more, since September 11 2001, he tells us that there is no alternative to warmongering, and Iain Duncan-Smith eagerly supports him. Who are the 400,000 people (plus their families and friends) who marched for peace on 28 September 2002 going to vote for? There is no doubt that a left alternative is desperately needed in Britain. In Scotland, the Scottish Socialist Party is providing a voice for those left dispossessed and disenfranchised by the big party big business consensus, and the SSP is confident of gains in the Scottish Parliament elections in 2003. In England and Wales we have much further to go. Building a left electoral alternative to New Labour is not an easy task. It takes time, patience, a willingness not to allow our disagreements to overshadow our common values. It takes an ability to make new alliances and new friends. Above all, it requires an absolute commitment to democracy, transparency and accountability and an overcoming of sectarian practices. It is a huge, huge task. But it is a necessary task. Campaigners for peace, against globalisation, trade unionists, public sector workers, civil libertarians, and anyone who believes in democratic values are all disenfranchised by the political consensus, and are entitled to be politically represented. The left has to rise to that challenge.

*Liz Davies*

## **The Use and Abuse of Science**

**Bertrand Russell, *The Scientific Outlook*, Routledge, 2001, 264 pages, hardback ISBN 0 415 24996 1 £45, paperback ISBN 0 415 24997 £9.99**

Bertrand Russell was a prolific author on a rainbow of subjects. Forty books through relativity theory, mathematical philosophy, the impact of science on society to education are listed on the endpapers. *The Scientific Outlook* was

written in 1931 when Russell was fifty-nine – although this edition is a reprint of the 2nd edition of 1949 which had minor changes. He was already a controversial figure because of his vocal opposition to World War One. No longer holding any academic positions, he supported himself by writing. The book was shaped by the times, when Stalin was already the bloody emperor of Russia and Hitler and the Nazis were rising to power. Today, we seemingly live in a different world, yet, for all that, the core messages of this book still have something to say.

Like Gaul, *The Scientific Outlook* is divided into three parts: Scientific Knowledge, Scientific Technique and The Scientific Society. The first looks at the history and philosophy of science and what science tells us about the real world. Russell's humanism shines out, firmly concluding that in the war between Science and Religion the areas of knowledge unconquered by science are there not because they are the realm of God, but because science is merely waiting to occupy and pacify them at a later date. Life and man are not the point of the Universe, merely minor and accidental by-products. As the scientist JBS Haldane responded, when asked what his biological studies told him about God, 'he was inordinately fond of beetles'.

Equally, Russell rejects the hard version of the 'causal completion of physics' that would mandate a fully determined world and opts instead for free-will operating within the limits of scientific law. So Hitler and Stalin ultimately chose the path of evil as much as Schindler and Sugihara – the Japanese Consul in Lithuania during World War II, who issued 4000 visas to Jewish refugees against the express orders of his government – chose good. Steven Spielberg equally chose to make a film about the former rather than the latter, not because Schindler's hundreds of Jews were better than Sugihara's thousands, but because Hollywood is at best Atlanticist and at worst racist. Russell, for all his enthusiasm for science, doesn't buy the idea that science is inherently a 'good thing', rather for him science can be used or abused. It can be put to the service of good and evil. In fact he hints further, threatening to go a step back and challenge the unique status of science.

There is ideology in/of science. Claims of scientific inevitability are used to bludgeon into submission those who argue from a different perspective, while buried within the science itself are all the prejudices of the age – racism, sexism and the rest. The problem was not that Professor H J Eysenck fabricated his studies of identical twins to prove his preference for intelligence to be the product of parents rather than teachers, but that those who didn't cheat had an in-built Nelsonian vision that was just simply unable to see results that confounded their prejudices. As Thomas Kuhn shows in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, once the paradigm is set, people believe despite the evidence of their eyes, not because of it. Copernican astronomy swept Ptolemy aside even though it was more than three centuries before stellar parallax was found to 'prove' Copernicus right.

The second part is short and looks at the interface of science and technology where theory hits the streets. Science is the productive creed of capitalism, its

motor. It underpins growth and progress. Not, of course, perfectly. Superior products can finish last when up against vested interests. Sony finally buried Betamax in 2002, but it had been a dead product selling since JVC tied up the majority of distributors to VHS in 1976.

For Russell – and for everyone else – improvements in medical techniques and agriculture, chemistry and physics have transformed the world for the better. Yet for Russell there is a limit. He is horrified by the manner soft science is used to manipulate society through advertising and propaganda, the former merely a more polite word for the latter. In contrast we learn less about how technology is contributing to pollution and environmental destruction. Science is allowed to roam freely across our world trampling heedlessly over today and tomorrow. The traditional defence that it would be wrong to limit science as we never know where it will lead is rejected. Russell believes there are some intellectual directions we neither want nor should travel.

The final section is Russell at his most pessimistic and most powerful, describing a future where ‘science’ and its practitioners are the religion and priesthood of an increasingly authoritarian society, where eugenics sorts the worthy from the unworthy, and those who watch the circuses from their organisers. The world becomes the battleground for the series of competing totalitarian states. This prefigures Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* and Orwell’s *1984*. All these three authors owed much to Russell. They all moved in overlapping intellectual and social circles. It is almost impossible to imagine their being unaware of Russell’s perspective, at least second-hand.

The essence of *The Scientific Outlook* is to proclaim science as the weapon against prejudice and superstition. It would be difficult to argue. Science – like democracy – may be flawed, but it is the best we have. When up to three million Americans believe they’ve been abducted by aliens it’s not the time to question science and its rationalism. Yet it may be time to ask for a science that is *ours rather than theirs*. Nearly three quarters of a century ago Bertrand Russell pointed the way and the dangers that would flow from not following such a path. If science is not the unique intellectual construct, which it was once portrayed, if the history of science is not the history of iterative movements towards the truth about the natural world, but rather the history of various social constructions of reality mediated through science, scientists and society, then there exists the possibility of a ‘science’ that will be one, or more likely a series of facets of the multidimensional world of nature, all of which are imbued with the very essence of the progressive politics and society that Bertrand Russell did so much to construct and mature. The question we are left with is ‘how do we get there?’

*Glyn Ford MEP*