

Class Warriors

The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism

Ellen Meiksins Wood
Verso £6.95 pbk

Working Class Politics in Crisis: Essays on Labour and the State

Leo Panitch
Verso £6.95 pbk

Ellen Meiksins Wood's book is a recent instalment in the continuing saga in which the shining knights of 'class politics' take arms against assorted revisionists. Wood's chosen weapon is an orthodox, but not a crudely reductionist, marxism. The position and role of the working class as exploited collective producer makes it the only possible leading agent of a socialist politics. She concedes that politics does not arise spontaneously out of class position – and needs to be developed in struggle by parties and unions. Yet to be effective it must be grounded in the objective class contradictions of capitalism rather than in mere abstract conceptions.

Not so for the new revisionists. In their recent work, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, Gavin Kitching and others have all severed this link between the working class and the socialist project, suggesting instead that socialism can only be

constructed at the level of politics and ideology. They have disconnected socialism from class and have diluted what is left either into a socialism based on 'general interests' (ie class harmony) or a 'radical democracy' whose collective protagonist is a popular bloc of social forces and movements, with or without the organised working class.

Much of Wood's polemic is well-aimed. She is right, for instance, to censure Laclau and Mouffe for their recent 'dissolution of social reality into discourse'. Yet the ultimate message coming out of her book is a conservative and regressive one, in two respects. First, she applies classical marxist categories in a universal and abstract way, whereas the theoretical revisions of Poulantzas and Laclau were attempts to grapple with real historical situations and practices that simply did not fit those categories. They may in the end have erred too far in the direction of 'autonomising' politics and ideology, but they cannot just be 'corrected' by reaffirming that ideologies belong to classes or that politics reflects class interests.

Second, like other advocates of 'class politics', Wood tends to blur the difference between 'working class' and 'labour movement' and to suggest that they are really one and the same. But the fact is that the labour move-

ment has frequently spoken for, but never directly embodied, the interests of the whole working class. It has conceded no real voice to the mass of women, whether at work or in the home, to black workers, the unemployed or the growing army of part-time and casualized workers.

Leo Panitch, a colleague of Ellen Wood's in the political science department at York University in Toronto, is likewise tough on revisionism. *Working Class Politics in Crisis* opens with a long polemical essay, which among other things criticises Eric Hobsbawm's call for a strategic truce inside the Labour Party and a broad anti-Thatcher popular front.

For Panitch the Labour Party, even when wearing the emperor's new clothes paraded by a media-conscious Kinnock and Hattersley, is historically and structurally, a top-heavy, corporatist party geared to winning elections and integrating classes under a national banner. He suggests that it is naive to think that labour can act in its present unreconstructed form as the centre of a popular alliance of new social forces.

Panitch's proposed remedies to the impasses of labourism are essentially those of the Bennite Left: radical extension of social ownership and control, constitutional reform, greatly increased accountability, and popular participation in

decision-making.

While Panitch is sober enough about assessing the reasons behind Benn's failure in 1979-81 to win wide popular consensus for these measures or to overcome the deep entrenchment of elitist structures and practices within the party itself, he will have no truck with those, Hobsbawm among them, who lay a good part of the blame for the electoral debacle of 1983 on the political 'adventurism' of the Labour left. On the contrary, for Panitch it was at least as much the opposition to constitutional reform by most of the parliamentary leadership and its name-calling and hounding of the Left which brought the party as a whole into discredit in the eyes of many voters.

Panitch is a sharp political analyst, and it is perhaps not his fault that essays written even as little as five years ago now sound distinctly dated. His politics is based around activating a socialist consciousness among a class located in the workplace. But what happens to this politics in the face of the massive growth of unemployment, poverty, restructuring and the low-wage economy that characterise the present phase? Not to mention – and Panitch does not – a politics based around not exclusively class issues: feminism, the anti-nuclear movement, peace. ●

David Forgacs

Moribund Militant

The March of Militant

Michael Crick
Faber and Faber £4.95 pbk

In the White House, they're worried. A party is on the verge of taking power in one of the most strategically important countries in Europe. It is pledged to remove nuclear weapons from its territory, to impose sanctions on South Africa. Even more worrying is its recently acquired inability to tell lies about what it can realistically do about the economy, de-

spite well-established precedents that calling a lie a 'demand' or a 'slogan' koshers it. No problem, Mr President, the firm's got a brilliant idea. We'll unleash entrism on them, guaranteed to have the party turning in on itself.

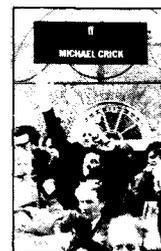
Of course it's just a paranoid fantasy worthy of the comrades of Militant itself, but it does defy rational explanation that Labour's national executive committee has spent session after session this year dealing with a sub-Trotskyist sect. In this new edition of his book *Militant*, Michael Crick clearly establishes the moral justification for acting

against a body whose self-declared aim is to infiltrate the Labour Party and take it over, or split and destroy it in the process. It takes the moral ground totally from under the feet of those who repeatedly stood up in public and claimed that it was 'just a newspaper'. He adds a new insight into the 'Liverpool connection', the disastrous blunders made by the Tendency there, and the way Neil Kinnock seized the initiative in dealing with them.

The papers first unearthed by a *World in Action* team, the Revolutionary socialist League's constitution and minutes from its early days,

form an appendix to the book, documenting that the 'just a newspaper' was in fact far more than that. Naturally Peter Taaffe, who figures in the documents himself, looked the tv cameras in the lens and denied their reality. But then ignoring reality has been one of the less endearing, if more enduring, of the tendency's habits all along.

This Trotspotter's Wisden documents and explains the changes in the central committee, the changes in policies, the changes in the numbers and nature of Militant's membership. Like the first edition it will be the definitive reference work on the



Tendency.

As before, Crick makes a bunch of inherently dull and dour people interesting, which has more to do with his literary skills than any lilt in the slogans of the comrades. But it would take a work of literature, a modern *Darkness at Noon*, to explain the motivations of the individuals involved. How a combination of the devotion of the Moonies, the hierarchies of the Scientologists, the secrecy of the Masons, and the directness of the Mafia could motivate otherwise honest and committed people poses a moral problem of more than local relevance to the nature of socialism.

Crick's conclusion is, from an orthodox Labour view, pessimistic. The Militant's march, though faltering a little, has not yet been halted.'

Fair Enough?

Proportional Misrepresentation

Peter Hain

Wildwood House £5.95 pbk

It is good to see an opponent come forward with arguments that engage with some of the real issues raised by proportional representation, such as accountability and the role of local communities, rather than rely upon simple appeals to party self-interest.

Peter Hain deserves credit for applying himself where others believe that stony silence is the best policy. He concedes that arguments about fairness are on PR's side – an important concession in the light of Labour's attempt to claim this virtue as its own – and indicates that he is prepared to accept the 'alternative vote' in domestic elections (where votes would be transferred until one candidate has an overall majority) and the single transferable vote (STV) with multi-member constituencies in elections to the European parliament.

It would no doubt be unduly mischievous of me to suggest

But he quotes NUPE official, Tom Sawyer, as someone who'd re-examined his ideas of socialism as a result of his experiences of Militant, and Sawyer is not alone. Politically, the Tendency can only survive in a milieu in which sloganised certainty substitutes for analysis. Their testing of such simplicities to destruction has made many people reconsider their lip service to the slogans by which leftness is usually measured. The rise, for example, of Derek Hatton has shown, yet again, how a conspiratorial and democratic centralist organisation can be hi-jacked by those of less than pure motives.

In the end, Militant, by negative example, has provided a great impetus to realignment, to a redefinition of leftness. The attack on

that this might be Hain's negotiating position for a post-election discussion, where electoral reform will be one of the key Alliance demands. It will certainly have its attractions for those who have been working long and hard to achieve such a breakthrough. Alliance leaders will need to be extremely convincing when they explain why they turned it down.

Hain's argument could usefully be stripped of the guilt by association which he throws at PR, even though much of it is informative. It simply isn't reasonable to rule out a policy on the grounds that David Owen favours it, though I agree that the conversion of the SDP leadership to enthusiasm for PR is one of the most impressive of the decade.

But this is not all. Hain goes on to accuse PR of association with both corporatist stability and Israeli-like instability. In attempting to show that the whole spectrum has got it wrong, he is in danger of painting himself into a tight corner.

Stripped down, Hain's concern is firstly with the intimacy of the single-member constituency which could be lost in the monster consti-

tuencies of STV; secondly for the influence of constituency political parties which he sees as an important force for accountability, and thirdly with the unrepresentative nature of coalitions, which allow politicians, he says, to abandon manifestos with impunity. As he says, 'there is considerable merit in the argument that governments should win a majority of votes, but this should be placed in perspective.'

For myself, I am not so entranced by the romanticism of the MP as social worker, fighting mainly a geographical interest. There would be considerable advantages in enabling voters to contact a member they supported rather than (as under first-past-the-post) forcing the majority to be represented by someone they oppose. I am also looking forward to the day when there is dialogue between, as well as within, political parties, since this may force politicians to talk real politics and release them from the sterile Westminster agenda. The habit of adversarial posturing does stunt any political creativity that might be around.

A representative system which more closely reflected shifts in opinion would pro-

duce better government and give every incentive to politicians to build support for their positions. If a party made itself unpopular by conceding too much in order to enjoy the delights of government, as Hain assumes most would do, it would presumably pay a price at subsequent elections.

The essential political and democratic case seems to me to be clear. It rests not on fairness but on the imperatives of pluralism and the empowering of the individual voter with an equal say in the political system. Hain provides us with a final chapter which suggests a number of other reforms (such as reform of parliament and decentralisation) which are meant to put the clamour for electoral reform in the democratic shade. I can accept that some of the claims made by PR's more insistent proponents, that – it is the only route to national prosperity and so on – are rather wild. But the essential point remains, the parameters of party competition will be widened and not restricted by PR. Electoral reform has now become one of the essential preconditions for the democratic revolution that this country needs ●

centralist, non-trotskyist Left. Their slogans have all along been destructively aimed to 'expose' the 'Tribunites'. But such 'exposure' required the consent and co-operation of the victim to work. Since the witch-hunted showed their hands as heresy-hunters during their regime in Liverpool, even the short-memoried left will have difficulty co-operating. Militant may well be around for a long time, but it will be a lingering decline, as a dying force trying to live down the memories of its political debacle in Liverpool. But in its moribundity, it may remind the Left that socialism is about many things – including honesty. It depends on informed consent, not misinformed coercion ●

Ian Williams

Alan Leaman

