

Brian Simon on the battle over education

Class Struggles



Education is once more at the centre of the picture. Kinnock's bid for the high ground at the Labour Party conference was countered by Thatcher a week later with a repeat of the populist cry 'choice for all' and the, by now stale, charge against '60s ideology'. It is clear that the major Tory thrust will now focus on a concerted drive towards opting out – an option to be extended to all and lubricated by extra cash. The battle is on.

But, oddly, the stage was not set by a politician. It was Sir Claus Moser's well-publicised presidential address to the British Association at the end of August which put the key issues with a sharpness and intelligence lacking in educational discourse in recent years. Education, Moser argued, should be the government's top priority. Britain was in danger of becoming 'one of the least adequately educated of all the advanced nations'.

'Major deficiencies' were undermining the country's well-being with 'dire consequences' for the future. Neither the government's education reforms nor the Labour Party's alternative proposals sought to reverse this malaise. Neither were attempting to make the required 'leap' in priority, quality and vision. A Royal Commission should be given the task of conducting an all-embracing visionary yet realistic review of British education.

Moser's plea was immediately rubbished by Michael Fallon, a government minister. What is needed, he said, is 'the discipline of the market-place, the power of the customer and the engine of competition'. With these, all will be well. There could be no clearer expression of the two opposing views now fighting for hegemony: education as a public good (requiring planning, foresight, analysis for its healthy development), and education as a commodity, its future determined strictly by market forces. This is the real issue facing education. The challenge to Labour is whether it can grasp the nettle, and fight for the conception of education as a public good with all

that that implies.

This thinking is, of course, implicit in the current Labour policy – the individual items of which may be unexceptionable. But it needs stating loud and clear; its implications working out in detail – not only for the immediate but for a longer future. Today Britain is at or near the bottom of the league tables on almost all the crucial indicators measuring the state of education – the result of decades of neglect. What is needed is a clear, all-embracing vision of the reconstruction needed right across the board to ensure that the country can face the 21st century with confidence. Moser's proposal was intended to set such a movement underway.

Instead the government is nailing its flag to a short-term policy directed at destroying local authority responsibilities for education, and developing conditions for a market in education. Adam Smith himself, the guru of the marketeers, might turn in his grave since he specifically argued that a genuine market could not be achieved, hence the need for state involvement in this sphere. His arguments remain apt. The privatisation of education through opting out plus the voucher initiative is simply a means of ensuring that a differentiated, hierarchical school structure, reflecting existing social and other divisions, is created. This can solve none of the central problems facing our system.

The future in education, which way? Towards privatisation and the establishment of what the *Financial Times* defines as a 'pseudo-market' (pseudo – sham, false, spurious – OED); or towards full acceptance of education as a public good, requiring resource support, rational planning, democratic participation? These are the alternatives. The latter concept, imaginatively presented, could gain widespread support. Will the Labour Party seize its opportunity? ●

Brian Simon

Beatrix Campbell on the search for an inhabitable world

Dark Star



Ursula Le Guin is an award-winning science fiction writer. Her book *Tehanu* is published by Gollancz

You're in a science fiction genre – clearly you think you're doing other things?

Science fiction is one of the things I do. The canons and the genres are intensely artificial. They build in judgements: 'If it's science fiction it can't possibly be real literature'. I am simply trying to subvert this from within, partly by moving around among and between the so-called genres, and writing straight fiction which is a genre itself.

But in terms of public perception ...

I want to change all that. It is very nearly impossible to have anything that has been genrified, recognised as a major piece of literature, and that's simply wrong. The first people who published me were those characterised as science fiction – it's a rather amiable sub-world. And it's a very nice place for a young writer to begin. The trouble is then you come up against the walls...

We're in a moment where some of the preoccupations that you've written into this genre to do with the state of the earth, a more organic relationship to the space we inhabit, our imaginings about the future, are part of a global conversation.

I don't see that I and some others have got very far. Much science fiction, and most of that written by men, goes on being about wars and violent solutions to all problems. They throw in ecology and there's always a woman second in command or something, and the crews tend to be nicely gender and racially balanced – there's a lot of window dressing but the basic concerns of the old fashioned science fiction seem to be exactly the same. This decade has been a bad one for people like me.

Why?

Thatcher and Reagan?

How have you survived it?

By increasing radicalism in a sense, mainly through feminism, moving further left than I imagined.

What do you feel about the political revolution that's happened in eastern Europe?

What I feel is fiction. I'm a story writer and my response to that is a short story which is a sort of combination of rejoicing and mourning. Joy and fear.

Why is this genre the one that contains so much that seems to be about war?

I think partly because, particularly in

the States, it was a strictly male genre for a long, long time. There is this large audience that wants boy toys and the guns, and the adventure stories and that's easy selling stuff. One aspect of science fiction, is that it goes in for advanced technology and our advanced technology tends so much to be weaponry. Also a war is such a tidy subject for a novel – you have the good guys and the bad guys.

But there's also loads of mess and death.

But we don't talk about that...It's always the lower orders that get killed in science fiction. I'm depressed by how fantasy keeps clinging to its incredible social castes and how it is always about the fancy people at the top and then there's the faceless masses that are sort of grubbing away. I'm guilty of that too but I've learned a few things as I went on.

So what do you feel about the modern era – the great cultural issues of modernity, as well as the things which are more familiar to us – the tower blocks and the machines, the great wars and the bomb? It may be the beginning of the end for this planet, but it's also the era in which citizens have created a culture of rights.

I think your answer is probably largely in what Pandora says in *Always Coming Home*. How she plays with the fact that she is able to dream this dream, and it's our civilisation of which the book is a critique, that enables the critique. You're pulling the rug out from under your own feet whenever you write a utopia. So you just have to dance in the air while you're doing it. You can't sit in a nice warm room with a nice typewriter and pretend you're not part of the game.

How do you organise your life?

Very quiet, very middle class. Old wooden house in a middle-sized American city on the west coast with a garden and a cat, a husband. It's all very conventional. The adventures are intellectual.

Your family are, it seems, of an intelligentia – educated, cultured, curious. What does that give you?

A very good start. My father was an anthropologist, and the cultural relativism was simply built in, it was a very open household. Everybody goes to college, no distinction between boys and girls intellectually, very high expectations, but no punishment.

There's never the less, in your work, a pervading sense of the difficulty of life. But you will not let the future be an uninhabitable place?

If I do, I can't write stories. The entry to

Tehanu is the figure of the child, the one most in pain. The book had been in my mind for 17, 18 years but I couldn't get it until all of a sudden I began to see Tenar with this child. The child is this element that was not present in the earlier books of Earthsea, of absolute irreparable injustice about which nothing can be done, even by a wizard.

Tell us something about the journey that you've travelled with the problem of gender in your work.

It was a long process right through the 70s and 80s, of catching up with the quicker feminists, the quicker thinkers. It's been absolutely exciting and enjoyable, reading all the women writers that I hadn't read, and finding this coincides with my centre and therefore I can write from it. Basically when I started, I was writing like a man, most of us were. I didn't convert to feminism. In a sense I have always knocked on the same doors, only feminism gave me some keys.

Where are you going with this question of masculinity?

We must be very careful not to be essentialist here, and not to say war belongs to men and women are ever so sweet. That's exactly what I was trying to get away from in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I would say at this point, my imagination is much more engaged with women than it is with men. It's partly that I couldn't write about women when I started and it's such a joy to be able to.

Certainly in the earlier works, the scale is national, global, universal and in the main the women's tradition of writing isn't in that space is it?

I guess not, though I don't know to what extent that is an artificial perception forced upon us by the canon makers. And of course, the devaluation of the local, the domestic and so on, seems to be a male professor's game. But when we've got people like Lessing running around, you can't generalise too much.

I had adopted that kind of male stance that women are mysterious others, which is an awful funny thing for a woman to do, but of course we are all trained dogs. I jumped my hoops for years – pretty flashily. Then you realise that actually dogs walk on four legs.

Was the transition painful?

No, absolutely not. The criticism from feminists was both unfair and just, which always hurts the most, because by standing on my back they were criticising me. I felt, come on, give me credit for writing the book, give me a