The Thatcherite project

Jack Frain reviews "Mrs Thatcher's Revolution. The Ending of the Socialist Era" by Peter Jenkins.

Father Christmas arrested for collecting for the miners

"The Socialist Age was coming to an end... across the whole swathe of Northern Europe the mode of politics which had dominated the post-war period, and much of the twentieth century was in decline... Socialism had come to reek too much of the past. It would live on as a dying creed, perhaps the priesthood remaining as the congregation departed".

So writes Peter Jenkins columnist for 'The Independent'. Jenkins welcomes the 'Thatcher revolution'. What does he mean by 'revolution'? In an article not reproduced here, written during the 1987 election he wrote: 'beneath the surface of this election campaign, beyond the reach of economic statistics or standard opinion surveys, a profound transformation of the political culture is in progress. The Old Order continues to crumble, the new struggles to be born as the south edges northward".

And what is so striking about this book is the total and utter confidence that Thatcherism is a progressive, forward looking force with history on its side and that our side offers only so many antique curios with no future. Thatcher's recent image of Labour — "prehistoric animal trapped in the Siberian ice"— could easily have been written by Jenkins.

But to understand why Jenkins is wrong we must first understand what he has got right. Firstly that Thatcherism is indeed a coherent project attempting a 'profound transformation' of British society. Second that Labour's 'alternative' is indeed an antique curio. Crosland's hope of an ever-expanding capitalism delivering a yearly quota of reforms and an ever-increasing standard of living, generating greater equality and thus greater freedom, benignly overseen by Labour governments was never a real alternative to capitalism. But, during the long boom it could stumble along. The crisis changed that. The dream was over. As Jenkins puts it "When the IMF foreclosed on Britain it foreclosed on Croslandism". Exactly. What is the Kinnock-Hattersley statement of aims then, explicitly Croslandite as it is, other than an antique curio. Jenkins even tumbles Kinnock's much vaunted policy review. "Not so much rethinking as the continuous process of repackaging". And, elsewhere, he makes the correct point that, alongside Thatcher, it was Tony Benn not the present front bench 'team' who "faced squarely the issue of decline".

Jenkins of course has no 'answers' for Labour because he believes socialism, in any shape or form, to be a silly dream the human race got hooked on for a while and which, growing up, it is now putting aside. Jenkins looks forward to the forward march of Thatcherism unhalted until it has achieved a new consensus, which, he admits, is still being contested, though rather in the way Chelsea might be said to be 'contesting' Liverpool for this year's league championship.

I think serious socialists have to accept that what Jenkins calls socialism is dead. Does that mean he and his ilk are right? Not at all. The point, of course, is that *there has never been an 'age of socialism'*. There has been an age of welfare capitalism. Dignify it with the title '1945 socialism' if you must. Call it the 'post-war settlement'. Marx would have called it capitalism tempered by "The political economy of the working class". The whole point is *that the post-war consensus was a labourist stop-gap* — a compromise. And when capital feels strong enough it comes back and restructures society again, according to its own priorities and with its own methods. This process of "passive revolution", to use Gramsci's phrase, is what we are living through in Britain right now.

Thatcherism is the long-term coherent project of 'their' side to end the stand-off between the classes that existed during the 1960s and '70s. Our tragedy is that the labour movement, the politically headless labour movement has no comparable project. That's why she wins the ideological war so easily.

Thatcher's project is opposed to the Post-War Settlement in principle, in total. Jenkins is absolutely right to say "Hers was the first conservative administration since 1945 which saw its task not to postpone or mitigate the advance of collectivism but to reverse it." Thatcher seeks to establish a new consensus, a new 'common-sense', a new framework for thinking — how to survive, how to satisfy needs, wants, aspirations — individualised, privatised solutions where the market rises as a secular god to pass final judgement on all worth and all value.

Now this project confuses some sections of the left who see, I think, only a 'return to the 1930's', destruction etc. We end up likening Thatcherism to some 'invading army' roaming the land wreaking and spoiling. But, in reality again taking a point from Gramsci's notion of 'passive revolution' Thatcherism is also a modernising project. As Stuart Hall has argued it is "simultaneously regressive and progressive".

That's why the project has won a degree of 'consent' from workers. (36% of workers voted for Thatcher in June 1987, the Tories highest proportion ever.) It's not just that a section of workers have benefitted materially, though they undoubtedly have. It's not just that our side is saddled with a leadership which refuses to fight, though undoubtedly it is. It is also that Thatcher speaks directly to people's felt experiences and fears (especially the fears!) of decline and malaise. Furthermore she offers, fundamentally, not 2p off the tax or whatever but an alternative understanding of that decline and an alternative solution to it. She does this not in ritualised exchanges across the dispatch-box but by... well let her explain what she is about: "What irritated me about the whole direction of politics in the last thirty years is that its always been towards the collectivist society. People have forgotten about the personal society. And they say: do I count, do I matter? To which the short answer is yes. And therefore it isn't that I set out on economic policies; it's that I set out really to change the approach and changing the economics is a means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method: the object is to change the heart and soul."

Thatcher

If you are wondering what this means just watch the new Midland Bank advert for its 'Orchard' Home-buying scheme. It is a quintessentially Thatcherite advert. 2 executives. 1 young, 1 old. The older has asked the younger to plan a new home-buying package for the bank. Having achieved this he asks his boss to meet him high up a derelict broken down tower block. They, and we, look out through the broken panes to the town below. "Why have you brought me here?" asks the elderly man, incredulously. The younger man replies, with feeling "Because when they built these things they didn't listen. People didn't want houses, they wanted homes." Most Thatcherite themes are played to perfection here. Bureaucratic, faceless, inefficient labour ('they') are to blame. Didn't listen to you did they? ('the people'). They took away our communities ('homes') and built the council estates ('houses') the last vestiges of feudalism in Britain. With that, and the dependency that comes with it went self-reliance, self-respect and order. Hence the broken panes, the dereliction. The collective solution is utterly discredited. But always, always, the new individual market-based solutions are at hand. "Tell me about Orchard then... " In such ways are we witnessing "a profound transformation of our political culture".

We have no need to fear approaching Thatcherism in this way. We can debate with the limited insights of a Stuart Hall for example without taking seriously a current like Marxism Today which tells us it was social-democratic labourism which paved the way for Thatcher and then proposes tactical voting and a Lib-Lab pact as an alternative to Thatcher.

But I can't believe I was the only one who found Chesterfield in many respects not an uplifting but a depressing experience. One of our problems at the moment is that the 'hard left' has cast itself as a 'defender of the faith'; invoking a timeless socialism which we must 'preserve' and 'restate'. Mixed into this brew is a creeping soft-Stalinism, which means that state hirelings from Eastern Europe not Solidarnosc exiles were invited to Chesterfield. One wondered at Chesterfield how many had actually read the keynote conference paper "The Working Class and Socialism" which argued 'socialism will come about by the self-emancipation of the working class or not at all".

This defensiveness is not difficult to understand. The organisational attack from the right-wing; the hijacking of the very notion of 'rethinking' by that right-wing to push through its 'Bad Godesburg' on the cheap, the suspicion of letting old certainties go until you know the calibre of the new ideas.

But if this defensiveness is understandable, it is also a gift horse to Kinnock. A journal like *Workers' Liberty* is in a position to play a much more positive, fructifying role in this debate. For ours is emphatically the politics of socialism from below, of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class. Ours is a socialism made by the creativity and skill of millions and millions of working people as they, simultaneously resist the old and erect the new. Our socialism is that of the vast extension of the elective, democratic principle into all those areas of life where the untrammelled role of the rich and privileged holds sway. We abhor all bureaucratic top-down 'socialisms' whether of the Fabians or the Stalinists. We take James Connolly's words on nationalisation as our guide. "State ownership and control is not necessarily socialist. If it were the the army and the navy and the police and the judges and the gaolers, the informers and the hangmen would all be socialist functionaries as they are all state officials — but the ownership by the state of all the lands and material for labour, combined with the co-operative control by the workers of such land and materials would be socialist... To the cry of the middle class reformers, 'Make this or that the property of the government' we reply 'yes, in proportion as the workers are ready to make the government their property'."

Our task which I have not addressed here is to make socialism from below aimed at a genuine self-governing democracy live in today's debates as a force not just to inspire but to direct. As Alan Johnson argued in Socialist Organiser's post election discussion "That should not be hard for us as Marxists to accept. That idea — working class people getting together and liberating themselves by their own activity — is something that's always been a central part of our history. I think it's more the reformist left which has had an idea of everything coming from above. I think we need to get back to working class socialist politics that stresses people organising together from below, to transform their own society. And we need to embody that idea in forms of policy".

In other words we have the chance to argue for a renewal of the whole socialist project as it is practised in Britain for the 1990s and beyond. If we can begin the work on that we could take the smile off Peter Jenkins' face.

A crisis in English studies

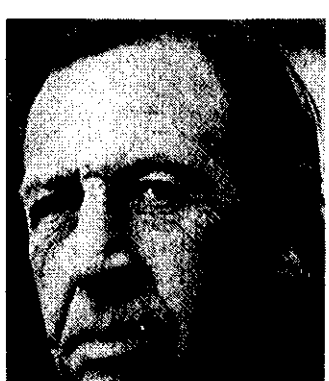
Brian McKenna reviews 'Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-84, ed. Francis Barker et al, Methuen 1986 and 'Popular Fictions: Essay in Literature and History', ed. Peter Mumm et al, Methuen, 1986.

These twin volumes register the much-vaunted 'crisis in English studies' that occasionally breaks out of the review pages of the Sunday papers and into the public eye.

Both are essay compilations culled from two radical publishing projects — the Essex University 'Sociology of Literature' Conferences and the Thames Polytechnic journal 'Literature and History'.

The 'Essex' volume is a farewell to '1968'. The collection's 'Introduction' tends, I think, to (mis)read history backwards in the way it presents its litany of 'novel political forces and issues' (including 'anti-psychiatry, counter-cultural activity and community welfare action') as being what the 'events' of '68 were originally about.

Surely one must distinguish between the greatest workers' strike in world history and the debris consequent upon 'the sense of frustration and bitterness the



Raymond Williams

self-criticisms and guilty introspection, the fatigue and depoliticisation that followed May 1968' (Frederic Jameson).

This is not to gainsay the importance of projects such as the French 'Groupe Information Asiles' (1971) or programmes such as Channel 4's recent 'We're not Mad We're Angry' which have given voice to the psychiatrised. Nevertheless, socialists should be aware that such 'post-structuralist' political activity in France has rejected any 'global' political practice (such as socialist revolution) or indeed any systematic theory (such as Marxism) as oppressively 'totalitarian'.

It is a relief to turn from some of the more abstruse essays to the opening article (on fictional forms in 1848) by that venerable old 'empiricist' Raymond Williams. By contrast I found the closing contribution by Edward Said, illustrious author of 'Orientalism', rather disappointing.

The most overtly political of the essays is Simon Barker's 'A History of the Present' which discerns in that nauseating English nationalism that was mobilised so effectively during the Falklands War a genealogical taproot: namely the myth of an Elizabethan 'Golden Age' (with Thatcher as 'Gloriana' herself). Central to this myth is a bourgeois notion of Shakespeare as 'our' national poet; this 'hegemonic' operation, argues Barker, must needs be resisted by the Left, as part of a general fight 'to disrupt the continuum of History and to produce a knowledge of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a period of crisis and rapid change'.

The significance assigned by Barker to arguing about Shakespeare would seem to find vindication in the essay in the companion volume 'Popular Fictions' by Graham Holderness, 'Agincourt 1944 — readings in the Shakespeare myth'. Holderness assesses three wartime 'Shakespeares' and shows that whereas the grotesque patriotism of Wilson Knight's pamphlet 'The Olive and the Sword' and the 'martial rhetoric' of Laurence Olivier's technicoloured 'Henry V' are now consigned to the margins of literary history', E.M.W. Tillyard's 'equally strange discovery of a governing philosophy of "order" in Elizabethan society and in Shakespeare's plays lives on as a potent ideological force'.

The 'Thames' volume generally shows a historical awareness less evident in the 'Essex' volume. Michael Denning's piece on John Gay's 'The Beggar's Opera', for example, shows how a literary work can play a constitutive role within its own historical moment (in this case that of Walpole's London).

Similarly, Paul O'Flinn's essay on 'Frankenstein' recounts the multitude of historical existences

produced for Mary Shelley's original 1818 tale by those whose interest has been to defuse its radicalism (including the older Mary Shelley whose conservative 1831 Introduction informs Ken Russell's immensely silly 'Gothic').

To conclude: it seems to me that those on the Left who are currently working (or trapped?) within 'literary studies' face twin temptations exemplified here by these two collections: to practice High Theory or to excavate the marginal and repressed.

Given the patently bourgeois ideological nature of English Literature as an academic subject such temptations are understandable. Indeed to some extent they should be yielded to: after all, questions concerning, for example, the constitution of the gendered subject in language address important gaps within Marxist theory; moreover the sexist and bourgeois canon of English Literature badly needs 'deconstructing'.

However there is still a need to do a job of work with the tools of radical literary theory on those canonised texts foisted upon unsuspecting A-Level and undergraduate students. (Though personally I think the Left should evacuate the 'Age of Shakespeare'; more than enough initials have been carved on that particular altar already). In this respect the Essex volume *does* indicate some useful casework in an appendix; it is a pity that 'Popular Fictions' does not follow suit.

If such work is done properly then the Left could begin to fashion an audience for a readable cultural review which could incorporate what is good about 'Marxism Today' whilst going beyond it.

Gorbachev's Russia

Janet Burstall reviews "The Waking Giant: the Soviet Union under Gorbachev", by Martin Walker. London, Sphere, 1987.

"Soviet condoms come in two kinds: the military variety that are so thick they could be used as galoshes, and the domestic brand that are so thin that they are holed either before use or during lovemaking. There is a lively black market in East German and Hungarian contraceptive pills, but growing concern about their effects on health. And, except for the well connected, the supply of pills is too irregular to be relied on. Soviet gynaecologists insist to Western interviewers that there are five sizes of diaphragm available, but few Russian women would claim to have found more than two sizes — too big, or too small."

Martin Walker's chatty book is full of anecdotes and readably presented facts about how the system works, or often doesn't, in the USSR.

Walker has been living in Moscow since 1984, as the Guardian's third resident correspondent there in 60 years. He has been able to draw on a wide range of sources, to write what seems to be a very well-informed work.

The book also puts an argument as to why reform is being attempted in the USSR, what sort of changes Gorbachev would like to make, and sources of support for and opposition to Gorbachev's changes.

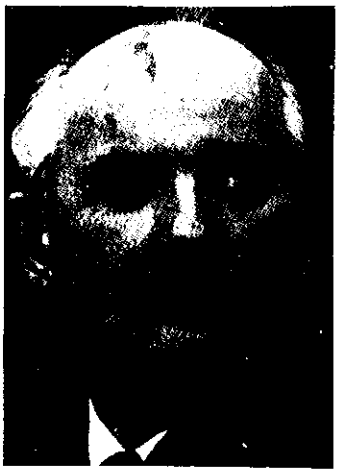
The pressure within the bureaucracy for reform comes from an educated "younger" generation (only in their 50s!). Gorbachev is the first leader of the Soviet Union, since Lenin, to have been university educated. This layer has fond memories of Kruschev's attempts at reform, and is frustrated with stagnation. Economic crisis has become more acute since the price of oil fell on the international market. Soviet oil wealth had buoyed the economy in the '70s.

The reforms which Gorbachev is trying to make, are virtually all directed at increasing productivity, encouraging a managerial/intellectual layer to apply themselves to economic problems, integration of the black economy into the state-controlled economy, limiting alcohol availability, and introduction of quality controls. Walker describes many of the reforms, planned or underway, and the obstacles to their success. The reforms, rudimentary as they are, have led to a variety of tensions and conflicts in different layers of Soviet society. These conflicts are illustrated in the book.

Reduction in the military's share of resources would free up materials and labour for more productive industry. The military is, of course, not willing to have its resources reduced.

The KGB is cracking down on corruption and the black market. This is not popular, because the black market is the only place to go to keep a car on the road, or for many other items or services which are only just in excess of basic essentials in the USSR.

There is increased financial autonomy for factories within the centralised economy. In a system where one's future as a manager is dependent on the arbitrary



Gorbachev

reactions of one's superiors, financial autonomy doesn't necessarily lead to more rational decisions.

Attempts to enforce quality controls have the effect of pushing down workers' output and thus their pay, which is by piece work. Quality controls cannot improve quality, when workers do not have the necessary materials to produce quality goods. They are not reported in Walker's book, but there have been strikes reported in the official Soviet press, over the loss of income due to quality controls.

Limited public scrutiny of access to membership of the 'party', i.e. the bureaucracy, and of the behaviour of party members, has been introduced. The powerful elite is reluctant to accept any public scrutiny which might diminish its power. They rejected (at the 27th Party Congress) a rule change which would have limited their tenure of positions. This was Kruschev's Rule 25, which had been diluted by Brezhnev, and which reformers had wanted to reintroduce in 1986.

The chapters on Chernobyl, and on the women's lot, in particular, reveal some of the most detrimental effects of Stalinist rule.

Walker accepts that Gorbachev is a good guy, who might be able to reform the Communist Party, democratise the USSR, increase productivity and living standards, and make a crucial contribution to reducing the risk of nuclear warfare on the planet. He doesn't even mention the lack of right to independent trade unions nor that Gorbachev organises the repression of the working class, let alone understand that the bureaucracy's entire existence could be threatened by a working class with increased freedom to organise.

But Walker is an honest enough journalist that there is plenty of useful, factual material in the book for those wanting to know more about Soviet life and politics. It's also a good read.

Labour and 'local' politics

Clive Bradley reviews "Democracy in Crisis — the Town Halls Respond" by David Blunkett and Keith Jackson, Hogarth.

The main arguments of Blunkett and Jackson are that local democracy is a vital element in a democratic society and that the Thatcher government's attack on local government is a major part of an erosion of democracy in general. The experience of Sheffield (and South Yorkshire) is, of course, seen as particuarly instructive.

They don't see local democracy as exclusively concerned with local government. 'Local politics,' more generally, includes a wide variety of groups — voluntary groups, tenants' associations, and so on. But local councils are very important. "Local councils counterbalance the power of Parliament when it fails to represent important sections of the population." (p.69)

This theme, of national *versus* local politics, underlies Blunkett and Jackson's approach — even where they describe the national implications of local councils' policies (for example in the campaign against rate-capping). Theoretically, they see regional inequalities as the product of the same basic processes creating international inequalities — "development and underdevelopment" in a characteristic phrase borrowed (rather anachronistically) from development sociology. The north gets a bad deal from the south (in England); Britain gets a bad deal from "international" capital, the EEC and the City, which is "located in Britain but the interests it serves are not those of the British people". (p.109). 'National politics', by implication, would be a broader application of 'local politics', on the international arena. Yet this is all that is suggested by way of implication for 'national' politics; 'local politics' is the theme.

In fact to have opted for 'national' politics is seen as one of the Labour Party's biggest historical mistakes — the main one of many criticisms the authors make of Labour.

Blunkett and Jackson have some interesting things to say, although often the book is a bit pompous, and frequently consists of page after page of banality. Overall, it's nowhere to go for political answers.