Book reviews

Ralph Fevre
Wales is closed: the quiet privatisation of British Steel

Spokesman, Nottingham, 1989
£5.95 (pbk.) pp. 164
ISBN 0 8512 4476 9

Reviewed by Alan Patterson

This book takes its title from graffiti found on the Severn Bridge in the early 1980s after the policies of the Thatcher government had created mass unemployment in Wales. In steel at least, the job losses were not simply the result of a long term decline in demand (indeed by 1984 output was back up to the levels of the 1970s) although this excuse was used to legitimise the imposition of the redundancies. They were due to an explicit government decision to reduce the amount of financing available to the industry.

Fevre chronicles the impact of the restructuring of employment at the British Steel Corporation's Abbey plant at Port Talbot during the period between the Tory election win in 1979 and the sale of the Corporation to the private sector in 1988. Nationally, BSC employed 132,000 fewer workers at the end of this period, a cut of over 70 per cent which was mainly achieved by the transfer of jobs to the private sector ahead of the sale—this is what Fevre terms the 'quiet privatisation'.

This transfer took two main forms, the early sale of sections of the Corporation engaged in specialised production, such as special steels and the manufacture of steel tubes and wire, and, providing the main focus for this book, the bringing in of contractors to carry out work that had previously been carried out by the Corporation's own employees.

Fevre pays particular attention to the impact of the 'slimline' plan which halved the numbers directly employed at the Port Talbot plant virtually at a stroke in 1980. However, the value of the book lies not just in this description of the sudden loss of over 5,000 secure jobs in a particular locality, and the impact of this on the area and its inhabitants, but also in the author's analysis of the way in which many of the jobs were not simply lost but were re-created in a new and restructured form. These 'new' jobs were filled not by workers with secure employment in a nationalised industry which provided good conditions and pay, but by workers in irregular employment with contractors. The contractors often provided exactly the same work content as previously, and in many cases employed the same staff. The difference was that these new forms of employment allowed BSC to offload its government induced financial crisis onto its workforce by reducing labour costs. The book documents the human cost of these changes: employment without job security, lower wages, lack of holiday entitlements and sick pay, and employers who exhibited scant regard for the health and safety of their workers.

Increased productivity at BSC was obtained by means of reduced labour costs but this was heavily subsidised by increased social costs. The unions apparently connived with management to persuade the workforce to accept job losses, with the promise of lump sum redundancy payments *and* the opportunity of continuing in the same work by obtaining jobs with the new contractors, (and, for twelve months, European Community funds to 'make up' the lower wages offered). But if the jobs were still required by BSC why were the unions agreeing to existing workers being made redundant? The inability of the steel unions to defend their members jobs was in part due to their failure to win a three month strike—the first national strike in the steel union's history, and one which had been forced upon them by the management of BSC with the encouragement of the government. Fevre reports that at Port Talbot even before the strike was over union officials were negotiating with the local management about how the redundancies would be implemented once the strike was lost.

In the final chapter Fevre offers a contribution to the theory of the social nature of production, arguing that unemployment is now one of the conditions necessary for the production of steel in Port Talbot. In this locality unemployment cannot be described as a 'scrapheap', rather it is a dynamic pool of potential workers who periodically move in and out of work. For Fevre, it is this regular experience of unemployment and the poverty it brings, and, when in work, the knowledge of the imminent return to unemployment which conditions the workforce into accepting poor pay and conditions. More than this, regular experience of unemployment ensures that workers will accept unsafe working conditions, and irregular hours ranging from too few to too many hours, and due to this 'flexibility' thus generate higher levels of productivity than could be extracted from a permanent secure workforce. The book thus lends support to those on the left who call for a citizens wage (or basic income—e.g. Jordan, 1992) independent of employment. It is clear

from the evidence presented here that it is economic insecurity which leads people to accept poor wages and conditions such as those offered to their employees by the contractors to BSC, and increasingly by the contractors to local authorities, since the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering.

The research on which this book was based took the form of a community study during which the author spent three years living among the people of the town. The richness of description and analysis presented is a testament to the value of such an approach. Fevre provides a well researched empirical contribution to the debate about the 'flexible workforce' and makes clear the malign implications of such a form of production, both in terms of the inherent fragmentation of the labour force and the reduced scope it therefore allows for workplace organisation (see Pollert, 1988), as well as the concomitant effect on the everyday lives of workers conscripted into this new 'reserve army of labour'.

References

Jordan, B. (1992) 'Basic income and socialism' in *Catalyst* 9 (Winter): pp.12-13.

Pollert, A. (1988) 'Dismantling flexibility' in *Capital & Class* 34 (Spring): pp.42-75.

Peter Osbourne (editor)
Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism
Verso, London & New York, 1990
£10.95 pp. 299
ISBN 0 8609 1543 3

Reviewed by John Hoffman

The essays in this collection originated from talks presented to a *Radical Philosophy* conference in November 1988 around the theme of 'Politics, Reason and Hope; Philosophy and History in Liberalism, Marxism and Beyond'.

Central to this volume is the argument that the future of socialism turns on its relationship to the liberal tradition, and it is an argument well taken. The revolutions of 1989 demonstrate in the most graphic fashion that a socialism which simply turns its back upon liberalism is a socialism which is authoritarian, unpopular and ultimately self-destructive. If Marxism in particular is to have a 'beyond', then its relationship to liberalism needs rethinking, and on this the volume has challenging things to say.

The Radical Character of the Liberal Tradition

What emerges from Furniss's essay on Burke, Arblaster on Paine and Blackburn's analysis of the slave revolts in the New World is the undeniably *radical* character of the liberal (albeit bourgeois) heritage. The notion of universal human rights provides a vision which is critical to the development of socialism itself. As Furniss demonstrates in a novel analysis of Burke's theory of aesthetics, bourgeois radicalism can even threaten the bourgeoisie when emancipatory ideas—'metaphysic propositions which infer universal consequences' as Burke memorably called them—move beyond the confines of a 'responsible'

middle class and inspire the property-less masses with a political agenda of their own.

If we are to define the relationship of Marxism to liberalism in a way which takes full account of the collapse of 'existing socialism', then it is vital that we vigorously acknowledge the radical character of this liberal tradition, (as indeed the *Communist Manifesto* does). However as Blackburn's analysis of slavery makes clear, in itself this is not enough. The human rights credo of the late eighteenth century was after all a radical *bourgeois* credo. Up to one tenth of French deputies in the assembly after 1789 owned slaves in the colonies and preferred to champion the rights of free 'men of colour' (some of whom owned slaves themselves) than to embrace wholeheartedly the abolitionist cause. In other words, to the extent that liberals defend socially divisive 'property rights', they demonstrate the contradictory character of their own tradition and thus its ideological limits. Marxism can only sustain the emancipatory thrust of the socialist argument if it moves through and *beyond* this liberal heritage.

The relationship has to be a 'transcendental' one, and as the contributions in this volume indicate, this requires both criticism and continuity. There can be little doubt, as Osbourne points out, that the 'post-Marxism' of Laclau and Mouffe, for all the heady jargon of its 'discourse' theory, simply collapses liberalism into democracy by ignoring the historic tensions between the two. In their 'peremptory and indiscriminate declarations' (as Osbourne calls them) that the social is always political the problem of the state disappears, and we confront nothing more than a 'libertarian mimicry of the formalism of classical liberal thought' (p.219) which leaves all its conceptual limitations intact.

Liberalism, the Individual and the State

Of course there is an important element of continuity between the liberal and socialist traditions as Richard Norman rightly emphasises in his spirited defence of the concept of equality in relation to feminism. For this reason he is correct I think to chide Marx for being needlessly pedantic for suggesting that the 'needs' principle is somehow in conflict with egalitarianism. Equality at one level (as Marx's own dialectical argument implies) always means inequality at another and this 'dialectical' observation strengthens the case for (a concrete) egalitarianism.

Norman however is less convincing when he dismisses the ideal of 'total liberation' as absurd since (he argues) it would mean the withering away of the state, the disappearance of all institutionalised authority and the elimination of power altogether. It is true that some form of power and hierarchy is inherent in all human relationships and so too is relative scarcity 'as far ahead as we can see' (p.136). But it does not follow from this that the state itself is synonymous with power and 'institutionalised authority'. On the contrary, humans have lived most of their existence with power and authority but with *no* state and indeed it is the liberal tradition itself which presents self-government as natural to humans. To defend the state in the name of realism therefore as Norman does is to perpetuate the paradoxes of liberalism when the task is to transcend them critically.

This is why Rustin's critique of both the state and the market is timely and relevant. It is, as Rustin rightly stresses, no answer to the public coercion of the state to advocate a form of 'civil society' which legitimates the private coercion of property since each 'abstraction' presupposes the other. A 'third principle'—that of identification, shared membership,

consensus—has to be emphasised if a communitarian concept of society is to transcend *both* statist and market-oriented notions of order and embrace a view of social justice which takes account of what Marx once called the 'violence of things' i.e. homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, etc.

All this requires a critique of liberalism which sustains its 'transcendental' character. The problem is that liberalism can be criticised in a way which leads socialists to extol what are essentially *pre-liberal* practices and institutions. For this reason Anne Phillips is absolutely right to argue that we should not reject the universal notion of the individual in liberal theory, but rather develop a critique which pinpoints the 'concrete specificity' which lurks beneath a seemingly abstract humanity. 'Abstract individuals' are only manifest through the differences which exist between men and women, workers and capitalists, people of varying ethnic, cultural and religious identities. These 'differences' (which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stresses in a tantalisingly elusive contribution) are crucial to a concrete concept of humanism —a concept which explicitly acknowledges that identity can only express itself through distinction. But (as Phillips is quick to stress) without a notion of universal identity (inherited from the liberal tradition), the entire project of emancipation collapses.

A critical attitude towards liberalism is thus quite different from a simple rejection. Rustin is, I think, in danger of blurring the distinction between the two when he comments that societies which contain a firmer moral and cultural containment of individual impulse might be 'less free, from the point of view of individual rights', but more communitarian. 'The rights of individuals to express themselves', he adds, 'are not the only positive value to be considered' (p.175). This strikes me as unhelpful, for a post-liberal view of emancipation must surely be framed in terms of a relational notion of individual rights which respects and strengthens the bonds of community. It is not the individual rights which are the problem: it is the abstract and contradictory way in which they are presented in classical liberal theory. A communitarianism which seeks to belittle individual rights is liable to become a *reactionary* communitarianism —as the fate of 'existing socialism' shows.

The Dangers of Millenarianism and Negativity

A similar problem arises with Arblaster's apparent support for the concept of a 'moral economy' in the ideas of Paine. It may well be (as Arblaster points out) that this idea has greater continuity with later socialist ideas than commentators often allow, but the problem is that as a quasi-medieval idea which arises from Christian and natural law traditions, it reflects a negative rather than a 'transcendental' attitude towards capitalism and bourgeois institutions and serves to buttress (again the experience of Eastern Europe is instructive) illiberal and autocratic institutions. Liberating the economy from archaic theological notions may be painful, but it is crucial to the development of a post (rather than) pre-liberal form of socialism.

The problem of whether Marxism itself is able to transcend liberalism lies at the heart of Bernstein's challenging argument on rights. He is correct (it seems to me) to stress that rights are socially derived (rather than god-given) and that they are grounded in community. There is, he argues, a distinctively Marxian account of rights to be found in texts like *On the Jewish Question* and the communitarian character of these rights derive from

Marx's dialectical critique of the separation of state and civil society in classical liberalism.

This communitarian conception, Bernstein argues, presupposes a political community which is self-consciously and actively constituted by people themselves. It is a community which has become 'disincorporated' or 'disembodied' by which he appears to mean that such a community would no longer be constituted passively in terms of race, religion, ethnicity or language, etc. but actively by people consciously emphasising a common humanity across all 'passive' divides. This is exciting but terribly abstract stuff. Bernstein *seems* to be arguing that such a notion of political community would have to be global and *supra-statist* in character but the level of argument is pitched too abstractly for this to be clear.

Nor is it entirely clear why Bernstein believes that Marx as 'one of the disasters of his late thought' (p.113) rejected this notion of the active community. It is true that the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* appears at times to suggest that if communism is *limitless* abundance, then the very need to resolve conflicts of interests through conceptions of rights becomes redundant. This reading of the 'later' Marx does imply a millenarianism which would simply rupture continuity with the past and is in serious tension with Marx's own dialectical logic. If such a millenarianism can be legitimately ascribed to Marx, then it must be regarded as a relapse into a pre-liberal 'utopianism' and what Marx identified as a 'reactionary socialism' which disdainfully rejects, rather than critically transcends, the dynamics of capitalism and its liberal institutions.

This point is central to Benton and Soper's reflections on the question of Marxism and ecology. In Benton's view both Marx and Engels seriously 'under-theorise' the material limits and pre-conditions of human interaction with nature in a way which can only impoverish the Marxian view of socialist emancipation. The point is well taken particularly if we emphasise as Soper does, that this 'under-theorisation' is in tension with the wider thrust of Marxist theory itself. After all notions of alienation and commodity fetishism point to the way in which social relationships (and therefore the relation of humans to nature) are concealed by consumerist 'forms' and the illusory autonomy of market forces. If Marxism points to a human history consciously made, then this must imply a full recognition of human dependence upon nature both as a pre-condition for and an on-going constraint upon human creativity.

A Valuable Beginning

The backdrop to these contributions was clearly the escalating crisis of the 'existing socialist' world. In the year following the conference (from which this volume derived) six East European regimes collapsed in the space of just three months. In 1990 and 1991 these extraordinary developments have reproduced themselves within the Soviet Union (or what was the USSR) itself, and it seems likely that had the *Radical Philosophy* conference explored the relationship of socialism and liberalism even at the end of 1989 rather than 1988, rather more might have been said about the challenge which these events have posed to the future of Marxism as a progressive socialism. Nevertheless what the book does have to say about this problem (by implication at least) certainly points us in the right direction.

Dick Geary
European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression

Studies in European History Series;
Macmillan, 1991
£5.95 pp. 85
ISBN 0 333 40605 2

Reviewed by Brian McGrail

This book is one of a new series being produced by MacMillan entitled 'Studies in European History' which aims to popularise the more detailed work of social historians in particular over the last twenty years. Designed for the student of social history the books in this series are of a long essay type, written by acknowledged historians used to writing on specific areas of European history. The use of documentary evidence, along with a plethora of references to first-hand accounts and the discoveries of earlier historians, makes the series a strange mixture of 'popular read' and *real* history being told by a recognised expert in the field. In this instance, a book of 85 pages with a bibliography containing 220 references has been created.

Geary's book thus hits one as an incredibly factual book. Dates of events, figures for union and political party membership, and short summaries of historical beliefs that I thought everyone, *even* the student of social history, knew are all there. For example:

> Lenin and most of the Bolsheviks believed that the Russian Revolution of October 1917 was but the prelude to a series of international upheavals which would engulf the industrial world… (p.51).

With slick rapidity a wide range of working class organisations and activities are covered. The differences between the approaches and forms of organisation adopted by the working classes of France, Germany, Russia, Spain, Italy and Great Britain are developed and expounded through the years of syndicalist militancy, the Great War, the factory occupations and general strikes, fascism and the depression.

However, for all its wealth of facts, Geary tells an all too familiar story which I consider to be Euro-centric post-war mythology. For behind the respectability of such a discipline as 'European history' there is a modern-day politically inspired tale being told. Before I reached the end of the book I knew how the book would end—the 'earlier period' of the labour movement (as Geary describes the labour movement prior to the rise of welfare capitalism) was a great push forward for working people; its great achievement 'the creation and consolidation of the modern welfare state', in other words social democracy and the present political system (p.72). But this denies the importance of at least one continuous tradition, that of revolutionary unionism within the European working class, which (1) fought the social democracy and gradualism within this 'earlier period' of the labour movement, (2) saw fascism as the outcome of the predominance and then subsequent failure of social democracy, and (3) understood post-war welfare states and social security systems, not as the great achievement of the pre-war labour movement, as Geary concludes, but as the greatest achievement of modern capitalism.

Despite being entitled *European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression* and not simply 'A Quick History of European Labour Movements' the book is precisely the latter and pays only scant regard to the actual political issues involved at the time. Although all the relevant groups of the era are mentioned (the French CGT, the Bolsheviks, the Communist Workers' Party of Germany, the Spanish CNT and POUM, etc.) and their organisational

beliefs and tactics are described, the usual dictionary descriptions for 'Socialist', 'Anarchist', 'Menshevik', etc. confine and stifle the discussion whilst necessary detail about the theoretical and practical strategies, which lay behind the history of these organisational tactics, is sadly lacking. The now cliched *raison d'être* of 'historical particularity', if not 'peculiarity', supplied for each organisational variant, and given as the determining factor in whether one group of workers are militant or not, is the closest the book comes to a discussion of the history of theoretical strategy. This is, however, a weak argument since it is clear that the working class of that time had theories and that these theories played a significant role in the events of the day, in some instances, hour (although Geary is right in pointing out that *theorists* did not necessarily play major roles).

In my opinion Geary wants to tell the story of European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression from the viewpoint of what he sees as the eventual outcome, that is, he is telling of a history which (for him at least) has ended—the story of a political legacy which is dead! If one reads this book between the lines it seems that for Geary it was precisely the rise of the welfare state which killed the political debates of the era he is trying to explain, which, since it has 'gone', can now be dubbed the 'earlier period' of the labour movement. It is as if this history occurred before the civilisation of Keynesianism. However, was the welfare state the end of that particular period of labour history and politics?

If one approaches the book, as I did, with the view that the debates of the 1900-1940 era are very much alive, and raise important issues to be reassessed and discussed, the myth that the welfare state is the 'achievement' of this period of class conflict falls apart. We then have to see *European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression* as the war and history that has not yet ended. The political legacy is not yet dead exactly because the welfare state has not delivered, which, incidentally, leaves the working class of the 1990s back at square one: social democracy versus working class self-organisation; parliamentary representation versus direct action; Keynes versus Marx; Ramsey MacDonald and Rosa Luxembourg spring to life! Hence, the topic of the book should not have been treated in the dry academic and flat manner that it has been. This fashion may claim to be informative as a first read for students entering the field—facts and figures compacted into a short history—but it lacks what is an essential part of any field of modern knowledge, namely, political motivation. Nothing is considered in terms of the labour politics of today, and *critique* is restricted to the problems of 'studying' history rather than in terms of the failure of most social historians to supply the working class with 'any' history. History is seen as having an interest in the facts of the past rather than as an essential moment of modern class consciousness. Hence, we have

> Older histories of labour politics tended to concentrate their attention either on intellectual/ideological debates, on the lives of great political 'leaders' or on specific political institutions.... How much these actually tell us about the politics of the ordinary men and—to a much lesser extent—women who formed the rank-and-file of labour organisations is, however, something of a problem (pp.4-5).

Trying to get inside the minds and hearts of ordinary men and women of that time may be a problem but it will not be achieved by studying history as history—on the contrary the only way to feel how they felt is to become a part of the same *living* history. To fully understand the

history of labour politics the student of European history is going to have to feel passion, anger, rage, and comradeship. They will have to see the world as 1900 socialists saw it—as part of a movement towards social change. Thus, labour history is the kind of history which cannot be sanitised for the educational establishments of technologically advanced countries. Therefore Geary's book is hardly informing the teacher and student of social history in the real sense of learning to be critical by being political.

Perhaps the whole series should run along the lines of Chatto's 'Counterblasts' with two social historians who have clearly different political perspectives slogging it out over the present day political importance of Lenin on Pannekoek or the role of communists during the Spanish Civil war, rather than along the lines of 'Ladybird' books for first year university and polytechnic students. Typical of the new education policies of quickie degrees on the cheap, the book, and maybe the whole series, falls into the danger of underestimating students, or turning learning into another consumer led economy where the government is the largest consumer of education. But there is a further danger in the tale telling itself whereby political credos are delivered in a populist form socially neutralised by a tinge of academic serenity—just as Donald Duck taught American audiences about the serious nature of the war or how to put fires out. What is not immediately perceived is the point of it all? Is the series the crammer's short-cut to exam success or the enthusiast's first insight on the road to becoming an E.P. Thompson, an Eric Hobsbawm or a Christopher Hill? Considering the way in which the politics of the project remain undeclared I find it hard to see the serious student taking anything more than facts and figures from it, but then that's the great shame about the whole project. Even the serious student will not be confronted by political choices whilst reading about labour politics presented in this manner. The book would have been improved considerably if academic sensibility and reasonableness had also been backed up by a clear political position. Instead one has to tease out the actual 'propaganda' which puts across social democratic notions of labour history as being precisely that, *only* history.

Yet, when it comes down to the detail, Geary's political partiality for the social democratic viewpoint comes out in his consideration of the failure of the German labour movement in the 1920s and the eventual rise of fascism. His analysis quite correctly centres on the split within the movement between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD), but although he makes sympathetic statements on both sides of the divide he favours the notion that it was the communists who split the 'revolutionary left'.

> Thus in few countries was the revolutionary left, which had to confront such powerful counter-revolutionary forces, united.... As we have already seen, the rise of separate Communist Parties in competition with socialist or social democratic organisations was a central aspect of the history of European labour in the inter-war years and a major source of working class weakness in the face of its many powerful enemies (p.59).

However, several issues come to mind which counter his account. For example, could many socialist and social democratic organisations (including the SPD) be considered as part of the revolutionary left? Or, if one looks at the actual reasons for the creation of separate communist parties, could their proponents by justified? Indeed, Geary gives enough information to undermine the background argument he wants to make. If his hypothesis is that

German communists should never have split from the SPD and therefore kept the revolutionary left in Germany united, then, would things have turned out differently? Geary's own reply is possible but unlikely. However, one senses that the idea of a united labour movement is his wish, but this would have necessitated a revolutionary labour movement *which would have included the involvement of social democrats.* Yet his own writing points to many of the reasons why the communists were forced to split from the SPD, including

> 'the SPD…was itself partly responsible for the implacable hostility between the two parties, which regularly rejected suspect approaches from the communist side and harassed KPD members' (p.69);
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> 'In the April of 1932 over six million people were registered as unemployed… Not surprisingly there existed a strong correlation between such mass unemployment and support for the KPD, with around 80 per cent of the party jobless in 1932' (p.64); and
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> 'Above all, 70 per cent of social democrats were in jobs, whereas the KPD became a party, indeed *the* party, of the unemployed. The different sections of the working class represented by the two parties thus had different interests: this compounded their ability to work together' (p.70).

Hence, the communists had little option since the SPD, and social democracy in general, could not act in their membership's interests. On the one hand the SPD had no longer any programme with which to claim a resolution to the depression, and, on the other, it could not go beyond capitalism. The KPD was thus more attractive to those hardest hit by the crisis. What would Geary have expected its members to have done? Stand around starving to death awaiting the New Jerusalem of the late Weimar Republic?

Unfortunately Geary has missed an important part of the German labour movement's history. His approach seems to be that 'what successes labour has won have been won in collusion with existing governmental systems rather than against them' (p.72). If we take the split from the SPD by a mass of its then unemployed previous members as unavoidable (which Geary seems to imply) then a more interesting subject to have looked at would have been the role and problems of the KPD. In his *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* Paul Mattick analysed this precise question. The KPD attracted many people with its more radical methods and slogans but by 1932 it had alienated itself from a mass of the population with its pro-Stalinist stance. Banners saying 'Help Soviet Russia' in the middle of depression-torn Germany only played into the hands of the National Socialist Workers' Party, with its vision of a revitalised Germany surrounded by impoverished neighbours. They could then claim that KPD members were foreign agents, whose interests were alien to the German populace. In fact, the role of Stalinist Russia and its satellite parties is never discussed.

When I first saw the book I thought that the overall project appeared a worthwhile and interesting challenge—the history of European labour politics from 1900 to 1940 in 85 pages. However I soon became aware of the mistakes in its starting point. Not only Geary's writing, but the guidelines for the series which predispose the book towards becoming a catalogue of facts, depoliticises the necessary political content of the project whilst, at the same time, it contains its own political presuppositions which only serve to reproduce the status quo.
