



Film: Hysteria and control

THE *Crucible* is based on the true story of the witch trials, which took place in Salem, New England among a highly religious rural community in the 1690s.

When the town priest finds local girls dancing around a fire in the woods they accuse a maid of drawing them into witchcraft. The girls are led by the priest's niece, Abigail. Scared and anxious to prove their innocence they tell tales of visits from the devil. Accusations of witchcraft are made against other townsfolk. Those who deny walking with devil are condemned to death. Those who confess, in an attempt to save themselves, are further accused. Hysteria builds.

The priest is weak, conceited and unpopular in the community. He uses the atmosphere of hysteria as an opportunity to bolster his position. When the devil walks in the town, loyalty to the church is essential.

The priest calls in High Court officials to authorise the witch hunt. Believing the hysterical cries of the frightened, over those who question authority, the court sanctions mass hangings.

The Crucible is a story of the state using popular hysteria to maintain control.

Arthur Miller wrote the play, on which the film is based, during the period of the anti-Communist Cold War witch hunts in the 1950s. The hysterical finger-pointing, the coercive pressure put on people to confess, repent and accuse others, are direct references to the McCarthy trials conducted by the state in the USA at that time.

The witch hunts which affected many labour movement activists, radicals in the film industry and intellectuals such as Miller himself, were intended to bolster the all-American-god-fearing-red-hating state.

The play and film address a more general theme of guilt and innocence. The innocent, yet all-knowing, children, of the town wrongly accuse townfolk of witch-



cry. Abigail, guilty of an affair with a local man, John Proctor, is held up as a person of unquestionable virtue. She is self-possessed and calculating yet at the same time she is a frightened child out of her depth. In the end, all are used by the Church leaders in their attempts to hold on to the support of the town.

Witch hunts, common throughout America and England in the 17th century, were used particularly to punish women who did not conform. The film doesn't draw out this history. The women characters are in the main shown as old hags, evil scoundrels or saintly figures.

In usual Hollywood style Daniel Day Lewis, who plays John Proctor, is isolated as the agonised male star. His search for virtue is made the central plot and his relationship with Abigail is emphasised. Abigail's vengeance against John Proctor's wife is shown as the over-riding motivation for her role in the witch hunts.

Alison Brown

Books: The first mass workers' movement

JOHN Charlton has written a very useful short summary of the Chartist

movement of the 1830s and '40s, the world's first national working-class political mass movement. He succeeded in demonstrating that Chartism was largely a *working-class led* movement where *working-class demands* were at the forefront. He contends that, with some exceptions, other general accounts of the Chartists have concentrated on the more "bourgeois" inspired elements — the Charter — and leaders — William Lovett, Feargus O'Connor.

The background against which the movement took shape is analysed: the periodic economic crises which shaped fledgling working-class struggles during these early years of capitalist development; working-class disappointment with the 1832 parliamentary reform legislation; the widespread hatred of the 1834 Poor Law.

The basis for regional differentiation in the movement is described. In Lancashire where large-scale factory organisation existed the demands of the movement were strongly class-based. And in Bradford, where rapid urbanisation and the destruction of old means of production had led to working-class subsistence being very precarious, the movement took on an insurrectionary character.

The 1842 mass strike is at the heart of Charlton's account. The idea of a "national holi-

day" and "sacred month" was first proposed by the Chartist leader William Benbow, a Lancashire worker and veteran of the Peterloo massacre. Benbow's notion of a national strike was influenced by the French Revolution: it was to be a political demonstration of the "people" against oppressive powers. In 1842 the strike was built on the basis of locally-determined economic demands and it never generated a coherent political character. Nonetheless it was a powerful demonstration of working-class power.

The epicentre of the strike was industrialised Lancashire. Charlton introduces us to the local working-class leaders. They were not inexperienced people. One of the leaders, powerloom weaver Richard Pilling, had been present at Peterloo, active on Reform Bill agitation, involved in the Ten Hours Movement and the campaign to free the Glasgow Cotton Spinners. He was a seasoned militant. Pilling's description of capitalist society is quoted by Charlton:

"...competition and the beating down of wages; unemployment and poverty in the midst of plenty... the reification of human beings under commodity production..."

All of this is apt, but does not amount to, as Charlton points out, "a 'working' alternative system of ideas beyond active trade unionism."

A socialist group, the Fraternal Democrats, were centrally involved in the Chartist movement — Bronterre O'Brien, Julian Harney, and Ernest Jones. They worked with Marx and Engels towards the end of the 1840s and during 1850s. Charlton gives some attention to their influence. He also briefly discusses in an appendix how Marx and Engels' revolutionary socialism were inspired by the movement and the society which sired it. This part of the story is, again, dealt with all too briefly and the influence of the socialists is underestimated.

After much detailed careful analysis Charlton fluffs his

conclusions a bit: they seem perfunctory and lack focus. He doesn't adequately assess the contribution of Chartism to later periods of working-class politics; he deals with the question of working-class revolution too briefly. Charlton's overall framework is fine, however: Chartism did have a militant, highly class-conscious, working-class leadership with a mass working-class base; it was a raw, spontaneous, response to capitalist society taking shape, marvellously creative and, although largely built on the radical tradition of the French revolution, was very politically advanced.

A very useful, enjoyable, perceptive book, and an excellent introduction to this subject.

Helen Rate

The Chartists, the first national workers' movement
by John Charlton, Pluto Press

Is it class or nation in Scotland?

IN the aftermath of the 1987 general election the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) raised the slogan "Yes to a Scottish Assembly, no to the Poll Tax". In more recent times, however, the SWP's ardour for a Scottish Assembly has cooled considerably.

But if anyone expects to find an explanation for this about-turn in the SWP's new pamphlet, *Scotland — the socialist answer*, they are in for a disappointment.

Bearing all the hallmarks of a pamphlet scribbled down in a hurry, and lacking anything in the manner of rational political argument, the pamphlet is one of the most incoherent political tracts ever to see the light of day.

The essence of the SWP's argument is perfectly correct: Scotland has a right to self-determination. But the current demand for a Scottish Assembly (or Scottish independence) is rooted in a series of illusions. And, more often

than not, it is counterposed to the idea of a fightback in the here and now.

What distinguishes the pamphlet, however, is that its author (Chris Bambery) puts forward a series of incoherent, irrelevant and sectarian arguments in order to 'justify' the basic case which he is advocating.

"The people of Scotland have a democratic right to decide on how they wish to be governed, and whether or not they wish Scotland to be independent", writes Bambery. But, he continues, "Scotland is not united." The real division is "by class, not nation."

But the fact that class divisions exist within Scotland as much as within any other country in the world does not necessarily mean that the people of Scotland should refrain from exercising their right to self-determination, nor that their right to self-determination is in some way weaker because of those class divisions.

Even at the height of late early twentieth century imperialism, for example, oppressed nations were divided by class contradictions. As Lenin himself noted at one of the early congresses of the Third International:

"A certain understanding has emerged between the bourgeoisie of the exploiting countries and that of the colonies, so that very often, even perhaps in most cases, the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries... fight against all revolutionary movements and revolutionary classes with a certain degree of agreement with the imperialist bourgeoisie."

But no socialist, not even Rosa Luxemburg (whose real views on the national question were, in any case, quite different from those popularly attributed to her), argued that the existence of class divisions within an oppressed nation undermined the right of that nation to self-determination.

Scotland is certainly not an oppressed nation. But that is not the question here. Bambery's basic position boils down to the argument that class divisions render the question of self-determination irrelevant. Funnily enough, the SWP does not apply such an approach in its Green-nationalist writings on Ireland.

Bambery argues that "a devolved Scottish parliament will have no real powers over the key decisions which affect our lives... Power does not lie in parliament. Real power lies with the unelected

officials who control the Bank of England, the civil service, the police, the army, the secret service, and so on... If Westminster is toothless, the Scottish parliament on Calton Hill will be a pale imitation."

This is crude anti-parliamentarism masquerading as a critique of calls for a Scottish Assembly. Instead of attempting to relate to the arguments about a Scottish Assembly, Bambery offers only empty and not very accurate abstractions.

Yes, real power does not lie in parliament. But it does not follow from this that socialists can simply ignore parliament. The Bolsheviks did not believe in a parliamentary road to socialism. But that did not prevent them from standing in rigged elections to the Tsarist Duma (a pale imitation of a bourgeois parliament if ever there was one).

The Bolsheviks' advice to those socialists who claimed that revolutionaries could not exploit parliament was straightforward: "Try it first; have a few scandals; get yourselves arrested; have a political trial in the grand style... If you have a really Communist Party, then you need not be afraid of sending one of your people into the bourgeois parliament, for he will act as a revolutionary must act."

But instead of discussing how socialists should relate to, and seek to intervene in, an eventual Scottish Assembly, Bambery offers only anti-parliamentarian prejudices.

The same anti-parliamentarianism is exhibited again when Bambery criticises the statement by Scottish Militant Labour's Tommy Sheridan, "I hope a Scottish parliament will legislate immediately for a minimum wage of £6 an hour, and a working week of 35 hours without loss of pay." Bambery sneeringly replies: "Neither would the bosses of multinationals based in Scotland be rushing to increase wages."

Bosses would not rush to increase wages because of legislation by a Scottish parliament. But the adoption of such legislation would certainly be a major boost to campaigning for the achievement of a £6 an hour minimum wage and a shorter working week.

If the 'logic' of Bambery's argument were consistently applied, then socialists would completely ignore all legislation passed by a bourgeois parliament, including, presumably, the banning of child labour and slavery: "Neither will chimney-sweeps and

slaveowners be rushing to free children and slaves..." (Bambery's argument is also at odds with the SWP's criticisms of the Labour Party's proposals for a national minimum wage. The SWP (quite rightly) criticises the Labour leadership for failing to set a figure. But it does not condemn in principle the idea of a national minimum wage legislated for by Westminster.

A further argument advanced by Bambery for dismissing a Scottish Assembly as a tiresome irrelevance from the "real issues" (as defined by the SWP) is that "a Scottish parliament would be dominated by the equivalents of Gordon Brown, Donald Dewar and George Robertson — names which are hardly linked to a promise of radical change!"

If a Scottish Assembly were to be dominated by the likes of Brown, Dewar and Robertson — which is, in any case, far from guaranteed: the Assembly is likely to be elected on the basis of proportional representation — it would be because a majority of the electorate voted for them.

To argue against an Assembly on the grounds that you do not like who would win the elections to it is sheer stupidity. By that 'logic', revolutionaries would oppose the creation of soviets! Wherever soviets have been set up, revolutionaries have always initially been in a minority in them.

Bambery's pamphlet fails to relate even semi-intelligently to the current groundswell of support for Scottish self-government. Instead, in true sectarian fashion, he counterposes the slogan of "Build the SWP":

"All roads seem to lead us back to Blair, Mandelson, Brown and crew. The creation of a Scottish parliament would *not* [emphasis added] avoid a confrontation with Blair. The real question is whether we can create a fighting socialist alternative to Blair's New Labour."

Tucked away in Bambery's incoherent ramblings is an essentially valid argument against the pervasive fetishisation of a Scottish Assembly both within and outwith the labour movement in Scotland.

But Bambery's arguments are so fifth-rate (when they are not entirely irrelevant) that any undecided reader of the pamphlet will draw the conclusion: if this is the "socialist answer" to the demand for a Scottish Assembly, then hand me the SNP membership form!

Stan Crooke