Europe without America

Martin Thomas reviews *Europe Without America? The Crisis in Atlantic Relations by John Palmer, published by Oxford University Press at 14.95.*

The reality is different

In 1977 and again in 1980 the US government took measures to curb European steel imports.

In 1987 the EEC tried to get an American-Japanese deal on semiconductor trade ruled illegal. Simultaneously the US was doubling import duties on Japanese goods because it said Japan was cheating on that same deal.

Over recent years the US and the EEC have had a running battle about farm trade. They have also had conflicts over European exports of machine tools, telecom trade, and state subsidies for the European Airbus.

Such squabbles, John Palmer argues, are not superficial. They reflect a slow but profound breakdown of the old Atlantic solidarity of the big Western capitalist powers.

US-European tension goes back a long way. In the oil crisis of 1973-4, the US bitterly denounced Europe's efforts to keep friendly relations with the Arab states, while West European capitalists complained that the big US oil companies were coining profits from the crisis at their expense. Since then the EEC has consistently distanced itself from the US's strong pro-Israeli stand, advocating recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

The EEC has also developed a distinct foreign policy on Central America, preferring to negotiate with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua rather than support the Contras.

West European, and particularly West German, capitalists have defied US attempts to limit their trade with Eastern Europe and the USSR. West Germany has even negotiated terms whereby East German goods epxorted to West Germany can be treated inside the EEC as EEC products.

While Western Europe looks east, the US increasingly looks west. Pacific trade is now more important than Atlantic trade. This shift is symbolised by the dominance of California business interests in Reagan's entourage.

The world in which you could speak of 'imperialism' as an unanimous blob is disappearing. Like it or not, Western Europe will increasingly be independent from the US.

The question, then, is what sort of Western Europe will it be. "A xenophobic and militarist Europe would make the world an even more unstable and dangerous place to live in. On the other hand, a Europe which broke free from the chariot wheels of nuclear militarism and helped demonstrate new ways to master economic, political and social problems could make an immense contribution to world freedom and peace". Palmer argues that we should fight for a Socialist United States of Europe, overthrowing both Western capitalists and Eastern bureaucrats.

This book raises important questions, too often ignored by the British left in favour of an insular nationalism ("Britain Out of the EEC!"). It has, I think, two weaknesses.

Palmer often does not seem sure who he is and whom he is talking to. Some of the time he writes as the European editor of that respectable bourgeois paper, the Guardian, giving advice to the capitalist rulers of Europe on how best to make a go of the EEC. Other times he is clearly writing as a revolutionary socialist. In substantial parts of the book it is difficult to know.

And where Palmer does express himself clearly as a revolutionary socialist, the forces he looks to are hardly adequate to the task. His main hope is in the West German Greens and the European Nuclear Disarmament movement. But such groups cannot substitute for coherent Marxist organisation in the task of fighting for an internationalist workers' strategy.

May '68

Lessons from revolutions

Clive Bradley reviews *'Revolutionary Rehearsals'* **published by Bookmarks.**

The Socialist Workers' Party have recently been having quite an educational drive, producing pamphlets and books on a wide range of subjects. This book, dealing with recent revolutionary upheavals in France, Chile, Portugal, Iran and Poland, is useful educationally.

"Revolutionary Rehearsals" provides straightforward narratives of events, all very readable, plus basic strategic conclusions. They show how in France in 1968 the general strike posed enormous revolutionary possibilities, lost because of the weakness of the revolutionary left and the policy of the Communist Party (although this seems to me to be underplayed). In Chile a social explosion, lacking clear direction, was led into the disaster of September 1973 by the Popular Unity government. In Portugal in 1974-5, after the fall of the dictatorship there were real possibilities of working class power. In Iran, workers' councils existed in 1979, but an 'Islamic' counter-revolution took place under the name of 'anti-imperialism'. (The SWP could do well to re-learn some of the lessons in Maryam Poya's essay as they cheer on Khomeini in the Gulf War).

Colin Barker's article on Poland (a condensed version of his book, 'Festival of the Oppressed') is probably the best of them — the clearest and most succinct.

Yet running through the collection is an inevitable weakness: the lesson, of course, is the need for revolutionary parties. But there is only the most general indication of what such parties would *say* and *do*. There is little discussion of the far left organisations.

In Iran, for example, Poya complains that the revolutionary socialists were "too small and too weakly rooted in the working class movement" to affect events, "however formally correct their policies". But to be even "formally" correct is better than to be wrong. Most of the revolutionary left groups were wrong. And we have to learn from that.

Of course, it would be bad if basic narrative was pushed out in favour of abstruse discussions about small groups' tactics: but the SWP's lack of interest in politics beyond the generalities is symptomatic of an apolitical view of what a 'revolutionary party' is.

Celtic fan or elder statesman?

Stan Crooke reviews *'Ireland — the Case for British Disengagement'* **by Conor Foley.**

It's a safe bet that any work on Ireland which opens with the proposition that the problems of Ireland "defy simplistic analysis" and do not allow for "ready-made solutions" is going to offer a simplistic analysis and a couple of ready-made solutions.

The truth of this is confirmed once again by the pamphlet 'Ireland — The Case for British Disengagement', jointly produced by the National Organisation of Labour Students and the Labour Committee on Ireland and written by Conor Foley in a style reminiscent of a Celtic football fan masquerading as an elder statesman.

"Ireland is the greatest moral and political challenge for us in this country," declares the author bombastically. "How we react... probes our objectivity, our principles and our values. It throws into question the very basis of our vision of the future."

Foley begins his pamphlet with a litany of the undemocratic features of Northern Ireland and their consequences. Partition has made Northern Ireland "the most peripheral and underdeveloped part of the UK economy," and has "retarded institutional secularisation and social progression" (sic). Northern Ireland, concludes the sage, "is not internally viable without external support."

Like a shame-faced British patriot, Foley then bewails the sullying of Britain's reputation as a result of its role in Ireland — its record "runs counter to the whole philosophy of liberty, equality, justice and peace on which we would like to see our society being based."

He is equally concerned about the pennies in the British taxpayer's pocket, bemoaning "the cost to the British people of our government's policy...we are injecting an estimated $1,000 millions a year."

His eyes still tear-stained at the cost of "our" spending in Ireland, Foley is grief-stricken anew at the sight of the Irish constitution being trampled underfoot: "In defiance of the Irish constitution, Dublin has agreed to recognise partition in an international treaty".

Foley's concern for preserving the sanctity of a constitution which not only denies women the right to have an abortion but also bans them from even thinking about having one, may go down well at Parkhead on a Saturday afternoon when he salutes the Irish tricolour, but will gain him rather less admiration in socialist circles.

But make no mistake about it, Foley knows a problem when he sees one. And the problem he sees in Ireland is called partition. He might offer only a simplistic analysis of the origins of partition, and an analysis of why it continues which is not so much simplistic as straight-forwardly wrong, but he nonetheless knows that scrapping partition is the solution.

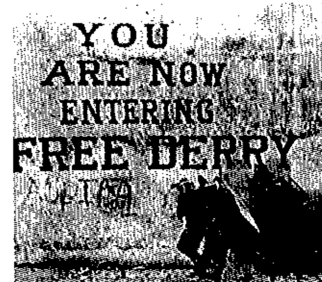
Though Foley refrains from sloganising lest it cut across his unsuccessful efforts to produce an oeuvre of statesmanlike vision, his ideas could easily be summed up in a few slogans: "Troops Out Pretty Soon!", "Unconditional British Withdrawal — With Strings!", "No to Unity by Consent, No to Forcing Protestants into a United Ireland!", "For the Right of the Irish People to Self-Determination, to be Achieved by a British Government!".

Withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland, writes Foley, "should not be undertaken lightly." It should be "only one part of a process of disengagement". And there is "little point in elevating the time period for this process into a major principle".

Foley also argues that the disbanding and disarming of the UDR and RUC by the British state must be part of the 'process of disengagement'. This will make it a rather long-term and bloody affair.

With regard to the Protestant community, Foley simply looks both ways at once. There is "no question of unity by consent", he writes, at the same time as declaring that his "strategy" for British disengagement "does not amount to forcing Protestants into a united Ireland."

But who will unite Ireland? Not the Southern Irish government, which has "neither the capacity nor the willingness to forcibly annex it (Northern Ireland)". Not the Protestant community, given its commitment



to "the supremacist manifestations and institutions of Northern Ireland." And not the Catholic community in the North either, given its numerical weakness.

Thus it falls to Britain to unite Ireland! Foley demands of Britain that it dismantle the repressive state apparatus in the North, that it disband and disarm the RUC and UDR, that it restructure "economic, administrative and legal links", and that it "make clear" to the Protestant community that it has "no option" but to accept unification.

Thus does Foley's Irish nationalism once again fuse with his British nationalism. As an Irish nationalist he offers a simplistic analysis of Ireland. As a British nationalist he rejects the possibility of the Irish being able to unite themselves, and advocates instead that Britain does the job for them.

Does Foley regard civil war and repartition as real possibilities under certain conditions of British withdrawal? He replies with a clear "yo" or, alternatively, an equally clear "nes".

In one place he declares that "a loyalist insurrection would have no realisable objective" and that the Loyalists could not "mobilise mass support for a campaign doomed to failure."

Elsewhere he mentions the possibility of "a massive increase in sectarian violence, spiralling in all probability into prolonged civil war."

But every cloud has its silver lining, and so too does civil war in Ireland. "In the event of any Unionist Unilateral Declaration of Independence," writes Foley, the IRA "could expect a considerable boost in morale" (!). The Republican movement has sense enough to realise that civil war and UDI would be a disaster for the people it represents. How sad

that the same cannot be said of the armchair chief-of-staff Conor Foley, at a safe distance in his Parkhead bunker.

Whoever stuck a pen in Foley's hand has a lot to answer for.

People's power without politics?

Neil Stonelake reviews *'Community Architecture'* by Nick Wates and Charles Knevvit, Penguin, £4.95.

Architects have been a profession only since 1937. Until this date, anyone could practice as an architect if they had the wherewithal to buy a name plate and business letterheads.

The period in which architecture came to dominate working class people's lives can be dated from 1948 and the growth of centralised corporate planning. The huge growth of building in the post-war period — public and private — housed many workers who had previously lived in overcrowded and insanitary slums. It also led to the growth of huge, impersonal high-rise estates where tower blocks stand like tombstones on the land where close-knit working class communities once lived.

This book describes a movement which attempts to eradicate some of the features which have blighted the new estates — vandalism, premature dereliction, crime and squalor — by involving the people who are to live in the houses in the design and construction of them. In the authors' words

"...the environment works better if the people who live, work and play in it are actively involved in its creation and management".

This is a laudable sentiment and one which, on a much wider scale, revolutionary socialists have always agreed with. However, at this point the approach taken by the community architecture movement starts to go badly wrong.

The authors emphasize the apolitical nature of the community architecture movement. Small groups of people working on isolated schemes may well produce beneficial results on a piecemeal level, but without challenging the economic basis of housing provision there is no likelihood that it will develop into an alternative to costly, jerrybuilt private housing or vast, depersonalised estates. In short, while economic power lies in the hands of a few, houses will remain a commodity and so will the people that live in them.

The alliances that the authors form are very revealing. While their arguments rest on organisation from below, they resort to a weird popular front of Liberals, ecologists, bishops and (last but not least) Prince Charles.

Indeed, the 'Windsor boy's' patronage of the community architecture movement excites the authors a great deal. Ironically, they rely on the heir to the throne to lead a movement which is based on the idea of rank and file activity.

Many of the authors' points on the faults of modern architecture are valid. In this they represent a new strand of thought which rejects the classical functionalism of Le Corbusier for the prescriptions of modern academics such as Alice Coleman (whose book 'Utopia on Trial' has clearly been a major influence on them).

But their politics are a kind of woolly liberalism, based on the works of E.E. ('Small is Beautiful') Schumacher. Their lack of an overall political strategy and their willingness to court the liberal bourgeoisie (or in the case of HRH, the liberal aristocracy) weakens the authors' case by diffusing the movement into a collection of well intentioned individuals.

Their own Utopia is on trial, and the verdict is 'not proven'.

With the boring bits cut out

Belinda Weaver reviews *'State of the Art'* by Pauline Kael.

You don't have to know a lot about movies to enjoy Pauline Kael's film reviews. She isn't one for the casual namedrop of some obscure film-maker, and you don't have to have seen every film ever made just to get started on her latest review.

Her latest book, 'State of the Art', is the seventh of her collections. Like the rest, it's very readable. Her style is easy; she uses no big words where simple ones would do. She's out to inform, not impress. She can even be slangy.

It's like talk rather than writing, though it's talk with all the boring bits cut out. Her reviews are often complex, full of ideas, but it's all so clearly put that the ideas can be easily understood.

All of Kael's earlier collections had titles with a slight sexual tinge — 'I Lost it at the Movies', 'When the Lights Go Down', 'Reeling', and so on. But in her latest book she breaks with that. "It seemed time for a change; this has not been a period for anything like "Grand Passions".

"I hope that 'State of the Art' will sound ominous and sweeping and just slightly clinical. In the last few years, the term has been applied to movies as the highest praise for their up-to-the-minute special effects or their sound or animation; it has been used to celebrate just about all the technological skills that go into a production. But what I try to get at...is the state of the art of moviemaking."

Kael has been reviewing films for the 'New Yorker' for almost thirty years. She is respected and feared in the film world.

What makes her readable and welcome is her readiness to puncture pretension of any kind, her championing of film-makers trying to make good films in a market obsessed with commercialism, and her ruthless attacks on the overblown mediocrity of many Hollywood movies today.

She is sharp but she isn't spiteful. There's usually plenty of evidence to back up her more unwelcome (to the film producers) comments.

Kael takes pains over her work. So many reviewers dash off their columns with little thought. Reading them, one often wonders whether they sat through the films at all. Kael is passionately interested in the movies.

She pounces on any ray of hope, and enthusiastically promotes promising actors and directors. Even when you don't agree, her reviews are worthwhile. They're stimulating because they are considered; they take a point of view. And they're funny too.

After Sylvester Stallone had built up John Travolta's physique for the abysmal 'Stayin' Alive', Kael queried the need for change. "Dancers don't need big body builders' muscles. What would they do with them — lift ten-ton ballerinas?"

Who gained from the Empire?

Rhodri Evans reviews *'Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Political Economy of British Imperialism, 1860-1912'*, by Lance E. Davis and Robert A. Huttenback, with Susan Gray Davis. Cambridge University Press.

The Empire cost Britain — overall — at least as much as it paid. But the income from Empire went mostly to lords, landowners, bankers and London merchants, while the costs were born by industrialists and merchants outside London.

The authors draw these conclusions from vast and painstaking research in official archives and company records.

It was, they show, mainly the gentry, and London bankers and merchants, who invested in colonial business and drew gain from it. The costs of that gain were large, and paid mostly by the industrial and commercial middle class.

Administration was relatively cheap. At the height of the Empire, the whole staff of the Colonial Office and the India Office, in Britain and the colonies, totalled only 5,400. But military spending was heavy. Britain had to support an army of 120,000 men in its colonies, and the biggest navy in the world. Considerable sums were also spent on subsidising loans raised by colonial administrations.

The British taxpayer paid. Britain was the most heavily taxed country in the world, and the middle class paid most.

GREETING FROM THE MOTHERLAND.

Taxes raised in India did pay for both the British regiments in India and the Indian Army, even when it was used in Iran, Afghanistan, or Africa. But the military cost of British rule in India was greater than that. A great part of Britain's huge navy and network of military bases was meant to defend Britain's position in India and the routes between Britain and India.

Other colonies did not even pay as India did. In reply to an appeal for money towards the costs of the Imperial Navy, Canada self-righteously explained that it was already paying for one Fisheries Protection boat on the Great Lakes and would soon be launching one on the Pacific coast!

The returns from investment in the colonies were not that big anyway. The authors establish that from 1885 to 1912 investments in the Empire were less profitable than investments at home or in other countries. From 1860 to 1884 higher profits were made in the Empire — probably because of pioneers' advantage in countries newly opened up to capitalist enterprise — but overall the colonies were not the honeypot of high profits that some capitalist politicians thought they were.

The book contains much other information. It analyses in detail how much the wealthy classes of Britain invested abroad, and where. It surveys the debates of major Chambers of Commerce on questions concerning the Empire, and their effect or otherwise on Government policy.

It does not look at the costs and benefits of Empire for the colonies. It gives a strong indication, however, that the imperial connection *benefitted* the ruling classes of Britain's settler states, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. These countries — Australia and New Zealand in particular — were able to run by far the highest levels of public expenditure per head in the world, with almost no burden of military costs, and had good free access to British markets while they raised high tariffs on British exports.

India, on the other hand, must have suffered severely from British rule. Public spending there by the British administration was very low, and the military costs to Britain of its world-power role brought no benefit to India.

The authors argue that their research explodes 'economic determinist' theories that the expansion of Empire was due to a search for big profits, and they see Lenin as the main representative of those exploded theories. In contrast, they quote approvingly from an assessment of British revenues from India written by Marx in 1857.

"Individuals gain largely by the English connection with India... But against all this a very large offset is to be made. The military and naval expenses... on the whole, this dominion... threaten[s] to cost quite as much as it can ever be expected to come to".

The attack on Lenin is, I think, misplaced. Probably Lenin assumed that profits on enterprises in the colonies were higher than profits elsewhere. But he certainly did not see the creation, maintenance and expansion of colonial empires as a policy coolly decided upon by ruling classes as a result of cost-benefit calculations.

Replying to the argument that *"raw materials 'could be' obtained in the open market without a 'costly and dangerous' colonial policy"*, Lenin wrote that this ignored *"the principal feature of the latest stage of capitalism: monopolies. The free market is becoming more and more a thing of the past; monopolist syndicates and trusts are restricting it with every passing day"*. In the abstract, an 'imperialism of free trade' might have been more profitable; nevertheless, a world of monopolies, cartels, protectionism, colonialism and militarism had developed from the old capitalism of small enterprises, and no amount of cost-benefit calculations could turn the clock back. Such was Lenin's argument.

This book should, however, explode one sort of 'Leninism' — the sort which bases itself on a few phrases and sentences from Lenin's pamphlet 'Imperialism' to picture the development of world capitalism as a matter of rich countries plundering poor ones, or even to label the working classes of the advanced capitalist countries as privileged co-exploiters of the Third World.

In 'Finance Capital', the major study on which Lenin based his pamphlet, Rudolf Hilferding argued that imperialism brought attacks on the living standards of workers in the more developed countries through tariffs, higher taxes, and the threat of war. Davis, Huttenback and Davis confirm this view.

The real Lenin

Gerry Bates reviews *'Leninism Under Lenin'* by Marcel Liebman. Merlin Press.

Many socialists must have scoured libraries and bookshops for a good biography of Lenin. Unfortunately there isn't one.

The books by Adam Ulam and David Shub are too hostile to give a clear picture. Tony Cliff's book is too concerned to take bits and pieces from Lenin's ideas to justify the current politics of Cliff and *Socialist Worker*. Krupskaya's 'Memories of Lenin' and Trotsky's 'On Lenin' are well worth reading, but fragmentary. Moshe Lewin's 'Lenin's Last Struggle' is essential reading, but covers only the final years of Lenin's life.

'Leninism Under Lenin' — published in 1975, but recently reprinted — is not a biography, but it is the best comprehensive survey available of Lenin's politics.

"In its struggle for power", so Liebman quotes Lenin, "the proletariat has no other weapon but organisation". Lenin was always concerned to *organise*. But 'Leninist' organisation was never a matter of sticking rigidly and dogmatically, irrespective of circumstances, to stereotyped formulas.

In his early struggle around the time of 'What Is To Be Done?' (1902), Lenin was concerned to create, from the scattered Marxist groups in Russia, a *party* which could operate coherently in conditions of great repression. Lenin thus argued for "bureaucracy versus democracy", "centralism versus autonomism", and "a complete dictatorship of the editorial board", in terms so sharp as to make it obvious that he was not laying down general rules for Marxist organisation in all conditions.

In fact the centralism of the Russian Marxists, and later of the Bolshevik faction, was always very feeble organisationally. That is why Lenin was impatient with people who moaned about the dangers of excessive centralism. But as soon as the outbreak of revolution in 1905 made a broad and democratic party possible, Lenin was vigorously on the side of such a party against the conservatism of some old Bolshevik 'committee-men'.

After the 1905 revolution was defeated, conditions became much more difficult again. The Bolshevik faction had 46,000 members in 1907. Only two years later, in 1909, it had just six local committees left in the whole of Russia. According to Trotsky, "The people whom Lenin could reach by correspondence or by an agent numbered about 30 or 40 at most".

Lenin's focus changed again, to what Liebman calls 'Leninist sectarianism'. With an untiring series of bitter polemics against both ultra-lefts (those who wanted to reject the very limited openings for legal activity) and opportunists (those who wanted to abandon the beleaguered underground party in favour of some broad legal organisation, and those who wanted to conciliate all the factions), Lenin battled to keep an organised nucleus going with a clear line. Liebman comments, probably rightly, that Stalinism later (in different times and circumstances) drew on the excesses and exaggerations in those bitter polemics to give 'Leninist' authority to its way of arguing against 'deviations'.

In 1917 Lenin's organisational formula changed again. The Bolsheviks became a mass movement again, growing from 20,000 members in February 1917 to at least 240,000 in October. And more: the party was substantially re-made in those hectic months. In April Lenin had to fight most of the 'old Bolshevik' leaders to

get the slogan of 'All Power to the Soviets' adopted. The Central Committee elected at the Bolsheviks' Sixth Congress in July 1917 included in its 21 members no fewer than 9 who had previously led major political battles or faction fights against Lenin within the Russian Marxist movement.

No fixed organisational formula defined Bolshevism, but only the relentless struggle to build a party geared to revolution and not drowned by the petty pressures of day-to-day activity.

Liebman also reviews Lenin's developing strategy for the Russian revolution, showing how it converged with Trotsky's idea of 'permanent revolution'. A long section looks at the period between the 1917 revolution and Lenin's removal from activity by illness in 1922. How did the Bolsheviks move from the liber-

tarian ideals of Lenin's 1917 pamphlet 'State and Revolution' to the harsh one-party state of 1922?

Liebman rejects the idea that Leninism led directly into or was loyally continued by Stalinism. Even the harshest measures of 1917-22 were measures of a genuine revolutionary workers' party trying to maintain a bridgehead for the world revolution in terrible conditions, not the tyranny of a bureaucracy alien to the working class.

Undoubtedly Stalinism was able to build on some of the desperate measures of 1917-22. In hindsight some of the Bolshevik leaders of that time, such as Trotsky, argued that some of those measures had been mistakes. But even with hindsight, we cannot say that the Bolsheviks were wrong to do what they could to sustain the revolutionary regime in bad conditions, while they hoped and worked for aid from revolutions in more advanced countries, rather than giving up in graceful and idealistic defeat.

Liebman identifies a marked change of tone in Lenin's writings from the time of the Brest-Litovsky treaty, signed between revolutionary Russia and Germany in March 1918. The joyous libertarianism of the first months of the revolution gave way to a grim determination to hold on in adverse conditions.

The SRs — who were openly counter-revolutionary — and the Mensheviks — who were wavering — were banned in June 1918, as the civil war gathered force. But when Martov, with a policy of critical support for the Soviet government against the counter-revolution, won a secure majority in the Menshevik leadership in October 1918, the Mensheviks were legalised again. They operated as a legal, if harassed, opposition throughout the worst days of the civil war in 1919.

In early 1920, with the civil war apparently more or less won, the Bolsheviks abolished the death penalty and restricted the powers of the Cheka. These measures were soon reversed in a new emergency, the Polish invasion of March 1920.

But it was not until early 1921 that the Mensheviks were banned again. The civil war had been won, but the relaxing of the war effort revealed an economy in ruins. 1921 was a year of famine, when millions starved to death and cannibalism reappeared in parts of the USSR. In February 1921 the hungry workers of Petrograd struck; in March the sailors of Kronstadt rose against the government, and the Bolsheviks banned factions within their own party. Help from workers' revolutions in Western Europe was clearly a more distant prospect than the Bolsheviks had hoped in 1917-20, and Lenin and Trotsky were urging the Western Communist Parties to adopt a more long-term policy of 'winning the masses'.

Those were terrible days. The emergency measures taken then were never to be reversed. But they did not derive from any drive by Lenin to create a police state.

At exactly the same time Lenin was arguing forcefully for the independence of the trade unions from the workers' state. Although many strikes were roughly dealt with, the Bolsheviks never banned strikes. In January 1922 Lenin even pressed for the unions to build up strike funds.

Liebman's concluding chapter is disappointing. He criticises Lenin's ideas on bourgeois democracy, on reformism, and on socialist democracy, but without much effort to probe beneath the apparent contradictions between Lenin's polemical phrases on these questions at different times. The final section, on Lenin and dialectics, verges on mysticism. But the book is well worth reading.

A taste of China in the 1930s

Bryan Edmands reviews *'Thank you Mr Moto'* by John P. Marquand, published by Souvenir Press Ltd., 1987, 287 pages, £8.95 hardback.

Set in Peking in the mid-30s this is an interesting and in places gripping 'Boy's Own' tale of intrigue, espionage and an inevitable romance.

The background is Northern China ostensibly ruled by the brutal bourgeois nationalist party of Chiang Kai-Chek — the 'Kuomintang' — though in many areas torn by conflict between rival gangster warlords and their armies.

Japan — since the turn of the century, a growing capitalist power — had been casting an imperialist empire-building eye over its larger neighbour; securing for itself Manchuria (North Eastern province of China) in the early '30s, and threatening further southwards.

Enter Mr Moto — honourable secret agent of the Japanese Emperor — into the still seemingly untroubled world of the older imperialist robbers: of parties, clubs, and a whole round of stultifying social engagements.

Quickly, he, together with Tom Nelson, an expatriate American lawyer 'gone native', and Eleanor Joyce, a beautiful, clever and mysterious American traveller, get mixed up in an ambitious plot to take control of Peking and facilitate the plans of

Kuomintang murder communists

an aggressive, expansionist faction of the Japanese ruling class.

Mr Moto, serving the more conservative-traditionalist faction behind the Emperor, intervenes...Tom Nelson is thrown together with Eleanor Joyce, staying one step ahead of murder, until...

This is the second of the Mr Moto series written in the 1930s and republished here after 50 years. Suprisingly, I liked the book.

Given the time and conditions in which it was written, and the setting, I would have expected, firstly, that it would have been more overtly racist and sexist — though of course a certain amount of stereotyping is not avoided. Secondly, the story-line is quite sophisticated and well placed — Tom Nelson's fatalistic philosophy is quite cleverly ruptured by the more positive actions of Eleanor Joyce. And finally the inimitable Mr Moto figure, around whom the plot revolves yet never concentrates upon. Here we have an unchauvinistic and fairly positive depiction of an Eastern character, who apparently became one of the author's most popular creations, catching the imagination of the American public of the time.

For a good, exciting, easy going read that transports you to an exotic and suspense filled world of the 1930s, I recommend it.

The red suffragette

From back page

to affiliate to the Labour Party. Lenin called this attitude 'infantile ultra-leftism', and tried to educate the world communist movement against being impatient and seeking revolution above the existing consciousness of the workers.

But this was a matter not of Sylvia being 'disturbed', but of her lack of experience and the British labour movement's lack of theoretical tradition. Her political environment had been dominated by the Fabians, who saw the bourgeois state as a means of bringing a more orderly way of life to the working class. Britain's main Marxist group, the Social Democratic Federation (later British Socialist Party), combined a sectarian socialism with nationalism. The BSP split on the question of the war in 1916, with its longstanding leader, Henry Hyndman, supporting the war.

After Eleanor Marx's suicide in 1898, there was almost no-one left in the British labour movement with a real understanding of Marxism, and the Fabians were left to dominate. No wonder that Sylvia's ideas were raw. Romero, however, suggests that Sylvia's communism was merely the moralistic radicalism of one who adopts the most extreme positions on worthy issues.

On her release from prison, Sylvia was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She lost her battle in the British communist movement against affiliation to the Labour Party. She returned to peace campaigning, created a storm by having an illegitimate child (in her mid-40s!), and became involved in anti-fascist activity.

When the Italian fascists invaded Ethiopia in 1935, she threw herself into building support for Ethiopia. Soon she was an enthralled personal follower of the exiled emperor Haile Selassie. All the rest of her life — she died in Ethiopia in 1961 — she would be a devotee of the authoritarian Ethiopian monarchy.

It is a sad and tragic story. Romero is not equipped to tell it properly, let alone explain the paradoxes of Sylvia's life. The book abounds in ignorant errors, big and small, about the world Sylvia lived and worked in. Because Romero does not understand that world, she relies on a few crude psychological explain-alls — a sort of long-distance psychoanalysis for five year olds.

Sylvia Pankhurst, whose paper was by far the best of the revolutionary socialist papers published in Britain during World War 1, deserves better.