The Thatcherite project

Jack Fraim reviews ‘Mrs Thatcher’s Revolution: The Longing of a Socialist Era’ by Peter Jenkins.

“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 retreat old 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 as a 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. Croxland’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, hewingly overgrown 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 froze on Britain it froze on Croxlandism”.

Exactly. What is the Kinnock-Hattersley statement of aims then, explicitly Croxland to it is, other than an anticlimactic curio. Jenkins even teases 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, 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 “Here 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 confines some sections of the left who see, I think, only a “return to the 1930s”, destruction etc. We end up likening Thatcherism to some ‘invading army’ roasting the land wreaking and spilling. 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 their 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 re 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 collective 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 get 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. Economies are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.”
A crisis in English studies


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 of Literature and History'.

The 'Essex' volume is a farewell to '1968'. The collective's 'Anti-Production' tack, I think, to (mis)read history backwards in the way it presents its binary of 'moral political forces' and 'anti-social' (including 'anti-psychoanalysts, 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 state-hierarchies from Eastern Europe to Solidarnosc; exiles were invited to Chesterfield. One wondered at Chesterfield how many had actually read the keynote conference paper "The Working Class was the Right-Wing" which argued 'socialism will come about by the self-emancipation of the working class or not at all'.

This defensiveness is difficult to understand. The organisational attack from the right-wing; the hijacking of the very notion of 'reform' that right-wing to push through its 'Bad Codiesburg' 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 the mouth. A journal like Workers' Liberty is in a position to play a much more positive, frustrating role in this debate. For ours is emphatically a 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 untramelled role of the rich and privileged holds sway. We abhor all bureaucratic top-down 'socialisms' whether of the Fabians or the Socialists, the James Connolly's words on nationalisation as our guide. 'State ownership and control is not necessarily socialist. If it were the army and the navy and the police and the judges and the gaolers, the informers and the hangmen would all be sufficiently functionaries as they are all state officials — but the ownership by the state of all the lands and materials for labour, associated 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 genuinely self-governing democracy live in today's debates as a force not just to inspire but to direct. As Alan Ryan argued in Socialist Organiser's post election discussion "That should not be hard for us as Marxists to accept. That idea — working class 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 to the working class socialist politics that stresses people's self-criticism and guilty introspection and depoliticisation that followed May 1968' (Frederic Jameson).

This is not to gloss the impact of projects such as the French 'Grands Formats' and 'Asiles' (1971) or programmes such as Channel 4's recent 'We're not here. We're Angry' which have given voice to the psychotised. Nevertheless, socialists should be aware that such post-structuralist political activity for France has exported 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 1845) by that venerable old 'empiricist' Raymond Williams. By contrast I found the concluding contribution by Edward Said an author on the orientalism, rather disappointing.

The most overtly political of the essays is Simon Barker's 'A Historical Geography of the Present' which discerns in that nauseating English nationalism that was mobilised so effectively during the Falklands War a genealogical taphroptum: namely the myth of an Elizabethan 'Golden Age' (with Thatcher as 'Gloriana' herself). Central to this is the bourgeois notion of Shakespeare as 'our' national poet; this 'hEGEMONIC' operation, argues Raymond Williams, needs broadening by the Left, as part of a general flight '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 a working class Shakespeare would seem to find vindication in the essay in the companion volume 'Popular Fiction' in which John Dillahunty, "Agnecourt 1944 — readings in the Shakespeare myth."

Holderness assesses three wartime 'Shakespeares' and shows how 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' collection. Michael Denning's piece on John Gay's 'The Beggar's Opera', for example, shows how a literary work could come to constitute a role within its own historical moment (in this case that of Wolfe's London).

Similarly, Paul O'Neill'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 1823 production 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 addressees are 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 canonical texts fossilised upon un-suspecting A-Level and undergraduate students. (Though personally I think the Left should evacuate the 'Age of Shakespeare'; more than enough initial have been carved on that particular altar already). In this respect the Essex volume does indicate some useful cases can be made in an appendix; it is a pity that 'Popular Fictions' does not follow suit.

If 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 'Marxist Today' whilst going beyond it.

Gorbachev's Russia


"Soviet consoms come in two kinds: the military variety that are thick they could be used as galoshes, and the domestic brand that are so thin that they are holes 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 know them to have found more than two sizes - too big, or too small." Martin Walker's chatty book is full of anecdotes and readily presented facts about the system works, or often doesn't, in the USSR.

Walker has been living in Moscow since 1964, 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 his 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 universally 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 has buoyed the economy in the 70s.

The reforms which Gorbachev is trying to make are virtually all directed at increasing productivity, this is an engaging managerial/intellectual layer to apply themselves to economic problems, integration of the black market into the state-controlled economy, limiting alcohol availability, and introduction of quality controls. Walker describes some of the reforms, the benefits and drawbacks, and the obstacles to their success. They are all, without exception, radically different to those in the ordinary world. In the West, for example, the quality of the bureaucracy is an essential element of the political system. The new dynamics in the bureaucracy are critical, they will be determined by the extent to which the new reforms are successful.

Unlike previous Soviet leaders, Gorbachev has recognised the importance of the internal market and the need to liberalise it. He has also recognised the need to modernise the economy, and this is reflected in his policies.

Gorbachev recognises that the economy is in a state of crisis, and he has taken steps to address this. He has introduced a range of economic reforms, including the introduction of market mechanisms, the liberalisation of the prices system, and the encouragement of entrepreneurship.

In conclusion, Gorbachev has recognised the importance of economic reform, and he has taken steps to address this. He has introduced a range of economic reforms, including the introduction of market mechanisms, the liberalisation of the prices system, and the encouragement of entrepreneurship. These reforms are critical to the success of the economy, and Gorbachev has shown a willingness to implement them.