



An analysis of maleness that doesn't mention capitalism

Do it yourself liberation for men

Amy Gilbert reviews "Iron John: a book about men", by Robert Bly, Element Press

It's corny, it's full of wild assertions, and people poke fun at it. So why has Robert Bly's book *Iron John* been on the bestseller lists in the US for more than a year? Why have men flocked to it? What male needs does it answer?

The book uses the story of "Iron John", a mythical "hairy man" from the woods who helps a young boy to fortune, to examine what is wrong with the way men are raised today. This story, Bly claims, outlines what all boys need — older, male mentors who can help them into manhood by advice and assistance at testing times.

In primitive societies, the male elders of tribes performed this role. At a certain time, a boy was removed from his mother's sphere and inducted into manhood by initiation rites, which differed from tribe to tribe, but which generally involved ritual wounds or trials.

According to Bly, modern American society offers no such rites of passage, and boys grow up confused about their roles. Fathers are often absent (20-30% of American boys grow up in fatherless homes), or are so punitive and distant that they're worthless. American society, Bly claims, conspires to keep men boys. Wall Street raiders, corporate leaders and politicians may

have power and position, but they're stuck in childish competitiveness; Bly scorns them as role models. And for too many boys, the crack dealer on the corner is the only powerful male they encounter.

Bly asserts that this hunger for the (absent) father accounts for much male suffering. Bly wants to point out a positive route to masculinity, one that takes account of what men have missed out on, (a sense of having reached adult manhood), and helps them make up for it.

But the signposting is blurry. Barring a few swipes at bureaucracy and at those who trash the environment for profit, he has no real critique of society (which, obviously borrowing from feminism, he calls the patriarchy). Capitalism is never mentioned; it's as if modern American society suddenly emerged, fully formed, from the tribal era.

Though Bly defines a problem, he offers no solutions. Followers of Bly have set up "Wild Man" weekends, where men go to talk of their miseries, to confront their anger at their fathers, and where, guided by other men, they undergo an initiation ceremony that marks their new (positive) emergence as men. This may be fine for the men who go, but what about the rest?

Bly offers them only this vague and waffly do-it-yourself manual, written in the high-flown language of myth, poetry and fairy tale. The kernel of Bly's argument is simple: life is hard, men need to face trials and to confront their darker sides so as to emerge as fully rounded men. But need this message be restricted to men? Don't women need to do the same thing?

Bly's book has given a voice to a "men's movement", and though some of the activities of

his followers seem absurd, any movement that makes men question their roles and seek to recover their banished feelings must be positive.

But can individual solutions work? On an individual level, yes, they probably can. But ultimately, the answer to the pain of Bly's followers lies in reorganising society altogether, not in the band aid cures of group therapy, wild man weekends and the like. Although Bly's men undoubtedly suffer, they are still more powerful and privileged within society than women are. The society that keeps them boys nonetheless ensures they have women to look after them.

Re-running the USSR debate

Martin Thomas reviews "Fallacies of State Capitalism", by Ernest Mandel and Chris Harman (Socialist Outlook, £3.95)

The debate collected in this book is a disappointingly pale re-run of the exchange between the same authors on the class nature of the USSR in 1969-70.

Neither author has derived anything from the dramatic events since 1989 to correct or to strengthen their previous arguments. Instead they repeat the arguments, but more wearily and with less verve.

Ernest Mandel's thesis is that the USSR was a "degenerated workers' state" (and indeed, as far as I can understand Mandel's position, that the ex-USSR republics still are such). The great

bulk of his argument, however, is negative: the USSR was *not* capitalist.

A single paragraph has the gist of that negative argument.

"In the USSR the key essential investments are not distributed via the law of value [which law "operates under capitalism as the tendency to create an average rate of profit"]. They are decided by the bureaucracy, mostly at state level. It is a planned economy (that implies no value judgement: an economy can be planned in an irrational, even senseless manner) — planned as far as direct allocation of resources is concerned. For seventy years, 'loss'-making enterprises requiring large subsidies have received a preferential allocation of productive resources. These have been systematically diverted from 'more profitable' enterprises and sectors. Such phenomena are unthinkable under capitalism and the law of value".

The argument here is not so much whether the USSR was state-capitalist, as whether any economy anywhere can ever be "state-capitalist". For Mandel, "capitalism can only exist in the form of 'many capitals'".

If Mandel is right, and profit-equalising competition is what defines capitalism, then certainly the USSR was not capitalist. But was it a workers' state? The logic of Mandel's argument, as distinct from the labels he uses, implies that it was a non-capitalist bureaucratic exploiting system.

"The socio-political struggle... in the USSR over the last sixty years... has been three-way... on every occasion the bureaucracy struck simultaneously at both the bourgeoisie and the working class... It did not simply 'over-exploit the working class', it also expropriated the bourgeoisie. Historically, it has played an autonomous role."

In the 1969-70 debate, Mandel found the progressive (and thus "workers'") content to the bureaucratic system in its place in the sweep of world revolution — "the Yugoslav, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cuban revolutions were... part and parcel of the world revolutionary process started in October 1917 — be it under unforeseen and specific forms" — and the beneficent "inner logic of a planned economy".

Those arguments are faded out considerably in the new debate. Mandel suggests that the USSR was planned "in an irrational, even senseless manner". He has to turn to the supposed welfare benefits of the Stalinist regimes

for evidence of their progressiveness: they had full employment, and workers in the USSR had a bigger share of the national income than in Brazil.

Why is Brazil the standard of comparison? I guess because it has the most unequal income distribution of any major capitalist country! Mandel's argument shows the "degenerated workers' state" thesis in the last extremes of clutching at straws.

Believing, myself, that the USSR was state-capitalist — in contrast to others in the Alliance for Workers' Liberty who believe it was bureaucratic collectivist — I would have been pleased if Chris Harman had convincingly demolished Mandel's arguments. But I was disappointed.

In the 1969-70 debate, Harman accepted Mandel's assertion that capitalism is defined by the *relations between capitals* — "yes, capitalism is, as Mandel argues, competition on the basis of commodity production" — though, inconclusively and in



passing, he also referred to a better definition ("the relation between wage labour and capital determines the entire character of the mode of production").

Both in 1969-70 and in the new debate, Harman goes on to argue that military competition between the USSR and the West had comparable effects to classical capitalist market competition — it was "competition between producing units... advanced to the point where each is compelled to continually rationalise and rearrange its internal productive processes so as to relate them to the productive process of the others". All that 20 years' thought and experience has added to Harman's exposition is greater weariness, more baffling use of "dialectics" (where the USSR appeared to be the opposite of competitive capitalism, it was dialectically the same), and greater schematism in arguing (or asserting) that only state-capitalist theory can enable socialists to look to the working class in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

Art and dollars

Belinda Weaver reviews "Nothing if not critical: selected essays on art and artists", by Robert Hughes, Collins Harvill, £7.99

Reading art criticism these days is often a humbling experience. You know what each word means individually; it's only what they add up to that's incomprehensible.

Robert Hughes's new book is just the opposite — funny, readable, accessible, but also well and thoroughly researched.

The book is largely a collection of reviews of art shows and artists, but there are book reviews and longer pieces, such as the introductory essay, "The decline of the City of Mahagony" which examines the eclipse of New York as a world centre of art. In the 1980s, Hughes asserts:

...the scale of cultural feeding became gross, and its aliment coarse; bullimia, that neurotic cycle of gorge and puke, the driven consumption and regurgitation of images and reputations, became our main cultural metaphor... The inflation of the market, the victory of promotion over connoisseurship, the manufacture of art-related glamour, the poverty of art training, the embattled state of museums — these will not vanish... now that 1990 is here.

With art prices so over-inflated, Hughes predicts that the number of travelling exhibitions must dwindle; prohibitive insurance costs will ensure that. For the same reason, galleries and collectors will become reluctant to lend valuable works, leaving gallery visitors fewer chances to see an artist's life's work whole. And galleries' limited funds already cannot compete with the fortunes of billionaires, so the existing decline in gallery purchases of important works must continue.

The cost of pictures has already distorted how people see art. Visitors to galleries cannot "see" Van Goghs or the Mona Lisa as earlier generations could: their vision is distorted by dollar signs, by the cash value placed on "masterpieces".

Hughes discounts much modern American art, especially the "always-something-new" art so much hyped by art dealers in the 1980s, which is already losing its value.

Though people looking back on this period will find artists to respect, Hughes claims:

...the good ones will seem like raisins bedded, very far apart, in the swollen duff of mediocrity that constitutes most late twentieth-century art. Whether the bad museum art of our own day... is better or worse than its late nineteenth-century equivalents, the stuff that Cezanne and Van Gogh had to slog their way past, is no longer an open question; because of the overpopulation of the art world, there is far more of it, and thanks to the lack of discrimination on the market-museum axis it is, if anything, somewhat worse.

Hughes punctures a number of inflated reputations, most enjoyably the artist Julian Schnabel and the French "philosopher" Jean Baudrillard.

On Schnabel's memoirs, Hughes writes:

The unexamined life, says Socrates, is not worth living. The memoirs of Julian Schnabel, such as they are, remind one that the converse is also true. The unlive life is not worth examining.

Hughes compares Schnabel to Stallone's Rambo (they have in common "a lurching display of oily pectorals"), and claims that Schnabel's growth (he never learned to draw) was smothered by his "impregnable self-esteem".

His skewering of Baudrillard's nonsensical ravings about America is wonderful. Baudrillard, the self-styled "aeronautic missionary of the silent majorities" [?], watches the New York Marathon on television, and witters on at length about 17,000 runners in "an end of the world show", "all seeking death", "bringing the message of a catastrophe for the human race... a form of demonstrative suicide, suicide as advertising".

At the end of this tirade, Hughes remarks laconically: "One gathers that this is not a *sportif* philosopher".

If you know anything about art, you'll enjoy this book; if you don't, it might make you want to.

A different voice

Alan Gilbert reviews "Contested Domains", by Robin Cohen (Zed)

"The 1980s have proved to be an infertile decade for the development of critical, let alone Marxist, social theory. Everywhere, and not least in the nominally socialist states of Eastern Europe, 'the market' is triumphant..."

"[Yet] all over the world (I have discussed in some detail in this book the situation in over 15



The force for change

countries) labouring people have galvanised some level of opposition to the control of the employers and the state... working people have found a voice (often a hesitant and uncertain one) that speaks to humankind in a different pitch and tone of that of their employers... It is to capturing this voice, this intimation of an alternative future, that this book is dedicated".

Robin Cohen's book is mostly a collection of articles previously published in a range of journals, each of them here supplied with an "endbox". It is in large part a polemic against the point of view which sees the wage-working class proper in the Third World as a relatively privileged group, with less radical potential than the larger and poorer "lumpenproletariat".

One chapter takes issue directly with Franz Fanon's claim that the "urban spearhead" of the revolution would be the "horde of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan... this people of the shanty towns".

The "lumpenproletariat", Cohen argues, is not a coherent group. It turns less easily to political activity than to despair, religion or internecine squabbling. When it is politically active, it is as likely to be mobilised by the right wing as by socialist or democratic forces.

New evidence that Cohen was right is the vicious spiral unleashed in South Africa's black townships when the ANC encouraged lumpenproletarian violence in the name of overthrowing apartheid by making it "ungovernable".

South Africa also gives clear proof of the other side of Cohen's argument: that the wage-working class in the Third World is capable of going well beyond "economistic" struggles. "On the contrary, there appears to be a wide acceptance [among the urban poor] of workers and their principal class organs, the trade unions, as articulators of a wider set of grievances and ideologies than those that can simply be reduced to a wage demand".

REVIEWS



Slavery was the "pedestal" of emerging European capitalism for more than 300 years after Columbus's voyage of 1492

Capitalism and slavery

Colin Foster reviews
**"The overthrow of
 colonial slavery
 1776-1848"**, by Robin
 Blackburn (Verso, £14.95)

Blackburn argues against a mechanical Marxist or economic-determinist theory which would explain the abolition of the slave trade, and eventually of slavery, by wage-labour being more profitable than slave-labour.

Slave-labour, he points out, was still highly profitable in the West Indies when it was abolished there; and the freed slaves became not wage-workers but independent peasants.

Slavery, he argues, was overthrown by a combination of three movements: the revolt of the slaves themselves (especially in Haiti); the growth of democratic politics in Western Europe (especially in the French Revolution); and the fact that the slave plantations, though still profitable, were becoming

economically less important, allowing middle-class democratic politics to move against them without grave results for overall profits.

His account of the anti-slavery movement in early 19th century Britain is a powerful corrective to any notion that British workers are uninterested in anything beyond bread-and-butter concerns. Though led by middle-class radicals, anti-slavery was a mass movement in the working class.

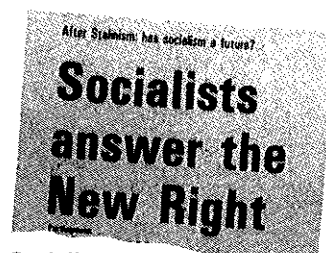
"The anti-slavery emblem — a kneeling African in chains bearing the motto 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' — became a familiar sight on cups, plates, brooches and pendants". Pamphlets, some written by ex-slaves, circulated in thousands of copies; in 1833, some 5,000 petitions, with one and a half million signatures, were collected to demand the abolition of slavery.

Blackburn's description of the great slave revolt in Haiti is, however, dull and blurred compared to C.L.R. James's classic

The Black Jacobins. Too many pages of the book are given over to intricate analysis of the rhetoric of upper-class British anti-slavers such as the creepy William Wilberforce.

And, though the book is mostly straightforward narrative without much "theorising", it is annoyingly peppered with neo-Marxist jargon.

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