

NOTES

THE POLITICS OF RADICAL PHILOSOPHY

1 David-Hillel Ruben

- 1 I begin by assuming that Radical Philosophy is a contradictory phenomenon, embracing as it does groups of all sorts, Marxists, existentialists, anarchists, apoliticals who are just bored with the sort of philosophy taught in orthodox departments etc. Being a contradictory phenomenon is neither good nor bad, but it does suit the organisation for some tasks and not others. It imposes certain constraints, objectively speaking, on the nature of the activity pursued by Radical Philosophy, and I presume that, short of expulsions, Radical Philosophy will continue to be a contradictory organization. Obviously, the more it is 'democratized', the more contradictory elements it is likely to embrace.
- 2 One thing a contradictory organization cannot do is to undertake coherent, revolutionary practice. To engage in meaningfully revolutionary practice, a consistent theory must inform that practice. But that is just what Radical Philosophy cannot provide, for there is no agreed theory save a 'vague' radicalism of the lowest common denominator. Without being informed by a coherent theory, practice - however subjectively intended to be revolutionary - will be liable to being objectively counter-revolutionary and misguided. For example, at the recent Radical Philosophy meeting at Oxford, someone said that in one case a local group put up a slate of candidates who were elected to the Board of Studies. But many radicals are resigning from Boards of Studies across Britain, since their presence there simply served to legitimize forms which they could not change. Again, someone else suggested that Radical Philosophy should involve itself more with radical political groups. The Claimants Union was mentioned as an example. But do you teach people merely how to receive maximum goodies from the bourgeois state, or do you use it to expose the limits of the bourgeois

state, and therefore teach people *not* to depend on and fetishize the State as an omnipotent and eternal form on which they depend? In the absence of a coherent theory, situated in the debates that have occupied Marxists (or maybe even Anarchists) for a hundred and some years, I really don't see that Radical Philosophy qua Radical Philosophy will lead people to take the objectively right decisions whatever their intentions.

- 3 Therefore, the only things worth while that Radical Philosophy can do are:
 - (a) to serve the debate with orthodox philosophy and expose its limitations, presuppositions etc;
 - (b) more importantly, to serve as a forum to which radicals from different points of view can put their theoretical contributions and debate with one another. Any shame in being 'theoretical' seems to me to be adolescent and wholly un-Marxist. I'm not saying, of course, that theoretical activity is enough. But, for practice, there exist I.S., I.M.G., Solidarity, S.L.L., even the C.P. There can be nothing wrong in setting up an organization which embraces only theoretical activity. Sensible people will engage in practical activity in other organizations which provide them with the proper, coherent, agreed, theoretical framework in which to act.
- 4 The suggestion that Radical Philosophy should move its focus of interest away from universities and towards greater involvement with active political groups such as Claimants Union seems to have been put forward in a totally confused manner. I'm in favour of having the widest possible field from which to draw contributors to the theoretical activity of Radical Philosophy. It is obvious why most of the contributors are likely to come from universities, for in a bourgeois society, not many others have the same time to devote to theoretical activity. But if you can get contributions to radical theory from outside the university, I am in favour and good luck to you.

However, if the contributors from the Claimants Union, or whatever, are to be asked to write reports or some such on what they are doing, without linking that to theoretically interesting

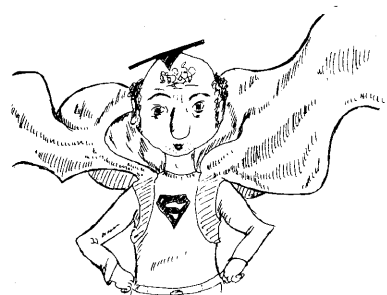


IF THE WORKMEN AND THE
AUXILIARIES IN THE REPUBLIC
ARE TO LEAD SOUND AND
OPTIMIFIC LIVES, THE
GUARDIANS AT LEAST WILL
HAVE TO DO SOME THINKING...



...TO PROFOUND A BODY OF
FAIRLY SIMPLE TEACHABLE PRINCIPLES
WHICH CAN BE USED IN OUR ACTUAL
LIVES WHEN WE ARE SURROUNDED
BY TEMPTATIONS, AND IT IS THEREFORE
DANGEROUS TO QUESTION THE
PRINCIPLES TOO READILY.

HANG ON! I
CAN'T REMEMBER
WHAT I FINALLY
DECIDED ABOUT
THAT...



THOSE WHO HAVE NOT HAD THE
TIME, OR LACK THE ABILITY, TO DO
THIS KIND OF THINKING WILL
BE WELL ADVISED TO ABIDE
BY THE PRINCIPLES OF THOSE
WHO HAVE DONE IT.
(words - R.M. Hare - Aristotelian Society,
presidential address - pictures - Janet Vaux)

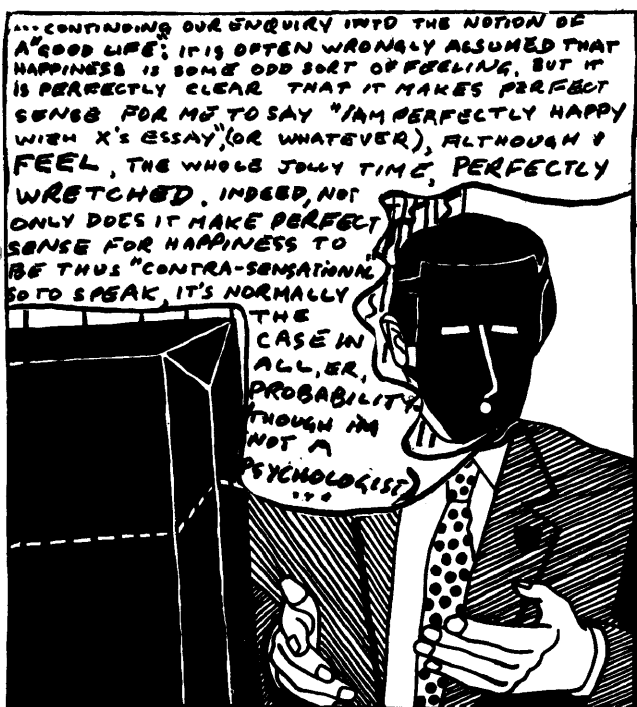
conclusions, it's a bore - and what is more, from being a theoretical journal, Radical Philosophy will become just another radical street newspaper. There is clearly a need both for theoretical journals and newspapers for radicals; but since there is a need for both, I feel no need to apologize for the production of a radical theoretical journal. If it is meant that, as Radical Philosophy, we should involve ourselves in Claimants Union work, I am opposed. Decisions must be made on consistent principles, and those Radical Philosophy cannot provide. I leave that to Radical Philosophers qua members of I.S., I.M.G., C.P. etc.

2 Ted Benton

There is obviously a lot of disagreement within the "movement" about (a) relative emphasis on serious theoretical work and political practice, respectively; (b) relationship between theoretical work and political practice; (c) the sort of political practice that it's viable to expect of R.P.G.

Both (b) and (c) are themselves theoretical questions, and (a) can only be decided on the basis of a theoretical position, in my view, but we still have to contend with the fact that many 'supporters' of R.P.G. have to contend with immediate practical/political problems in their departments, universities, colleges, etc.

Therefore I suggest that if (as I hope) another Conference is organized in London this year, a clear division be made in conference-time between intellectual work, and debate about the political practice of the organization. I also suggest that at least some of the latter time be allocated early on. This might make it easier to do serious theoretical work in the times devoted to it. The development of theory is absolutely crucial to the future of revolutionary politics in Britain and R.P.G. can make a uniquely important contribution to it. I'm not, of course, saying that we have to postpone political practice till we have the correct theory! - though I do think that the theoretical work of R.P.G. can be much more important for the whole revolutionary struggle than any political practice it may develop.



ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHIES?

Bob Brecher

The contents of 'Radical Philosophy, 3' highlight two of the central tensions in the movement. Both are manifest in Colin Beardon's article, "On alternative philosophies", in its glib and muddled presentation of marxism as the sole viable alternative to "traditional" philosophy. Nevertheless, the gist of what he says might be right. The two tensions are as follows.

1. That between the practice of philosophy and the pursuit of political ideals. Beardon says, "Those parts of the Liberation groups which are seriously concerned with changing oppressive features of society have rapidly become overtly political and have unified with wider political movements. I see no other alternative for Radical Philosophy. Either a few like-minded professionals will have found an outlet for their interests, and little else will happen, or the Group must become seriously committed to changing the present state of philosophy." 2. That between the espousal of marxism as the only alternative to "traditional" philosophy, and the avowal of non-sectarianism in the group's manifesto. Here Beardon writes, "It would be a hopeless task to devise a philosophy that is not trivial, all we can do is devise philosophies that reflect certain viewpoints. There are many possible viewpoints that differ from the orthodox one, but the important point is, how many reflect the viewpoint of a large enough body to make effective changes in the educational system even feasible? Only a Marxist philosophy sets out to do just that..."

Let's have a look at these two tensions. In order to see how they arise, or how I think they do, let me give a caricature sketch of how someone might become a radical philosopher.

A student becomes fed up with the Oxford mixture served up to him as philosophy. The endless, and usually pointless, analysis, the clever, showy logic-chopping, the crossword-puzzle attitudes of the professionals bores him stiff; he'd expected something far better from philosophy, something with a real-life purpose, not just an esoteric game. Perhaps it's in the bizarre meanderings of the so-called moral philosophers that he realizes that the boredom of the subject masks something more important - its pretended a-morality and a-politicality. Surely philosophy should be a moral activity, not merely a discussion of piano practice (Stevenson) or red motor cars (Hare). It shouldn't be just a second-order, apres-ski subject, attempting to correct other people's mistakes. He sees that the boring triviality of linguistic philosophy is inextricably bound up with the general isolation of the academic, the ivory-tower atmosphere of universities, the all too common human inadequacy of the academic. Having realised this, he, and others like him, begin to move away from pure logic-chopping. Now, metaphysics is no longer disreputable; courses appear on Hegel, Marx, Freud, Sartre; papers appear attacking the so-called is/ought dichotomy; Wittgenstein is re-read, and "forms of life" come into fashion. Radical philosophy is born. But where does this - important and necessary though it is - leave the radical philosopher's dissatisfaction with the academic? He's still doing no more than talking and writing, whereas what he wants to do is to change things, not to be an elitist intellectual. Nor does he want to give up philosophy. He may have taken part in sit-ins, and joined picket-lines; but this is still inadequate, because he wants what he DOES to stem from what he professionally THINKS, from his PHILOSOPHY. After all, look at Russell and Sartre, or even Spinoza or Socrates - though not at Aristotle or Leibniz...or Hegel.

But what Russell did in public had nothing to do with his philosophy, though everything to do with his "philosophy of life", in its best, most vulgar sense. Sartre only started doing things when he turned from existentialism to marxism. And that's the point; marxism is the one system of thought that requires the marriage of theory and practice, the one philosophy available to us which is a philosophy of life. But this is only the beginning of the change we need, for many radical philosophers have left hopelessly out-of-touch linguistic analysis for hopelessly out-of-touch academic marxism. They are as alienated from their idealized workers as the Oxford philosophers are from the "ordinary" people whom they imagine to speak "ordinary" language.

Not only are many marxist philosophers in the universities horribly uncritical ideologues, and thus incapable of allowing half a dozen, let alone a hundred flowers blossom, but, perhaps even more sadly, they remain academics with little sense of reality, of how real people live, of what inspires them, of their hopes and fears. Has Beardon experienced those 1½ years of western non-marxist philosophy in Moscow? Has he listened to the Czech philosophers thrown out of Charles university in Prague for daring to suggest that marxism might be open to socialist criticism, and acting on what they thought, in the vanguard of the "Prague Spring"? The workers, whose "practical alternative viewpoint" some marxist philosophers think they've adopted, hold them in contempt, because they regard the whole academic set-up as a fraud, perpetuated to prop up the status quo, radicals and all. And to a large extent they're right.

Both tensions remain; between philosophic thought and political action; and between Marxism and unorthodoxy. This is very depressing, for the conviction remains that philosophy *ought* to have real and fairly direct consequences, and that philosophers *ought* to set certain standards of academic disinterestedness. Wisdom, not mere cleverness, should be our goal; and wisdom, we feel, is a virtue, and should be put to virtuous use. Is there no solution then?

Well, I think that, for all I have said against dogmatic marxism, an open-minded socialism might be one. Committed marxist philosophers might be able to do much better with more of what I'd call the human qualities - remember "socialism with a human face"? It was meant literally. Less intolerance, more sympathetic understanding of non-philosophers; less hardness, more real concern. Maybe even an assault on the academy from the outside. After all, one of the few positive achievements of what passed in Czechoslovakia for marxism was the incorporation of the university into life, life into the university; and it was just this that so nearly destroyed the rigid orthodoxy, for the flowers of the Prague Spring grew in the philosophy faculty at Prague, and blossomed on the streets and in the homes. The other thing that I think would be needed is a proper working-out and justification of how "view-points", or whatever they'd be better called, are the ground of any philosophy, and of how, given this, philosophy differs from ideology pure and simple. More stress would have to be laid on the imagination and the emotions, the parts they play in philosophy. It's a hard job, requiring a transformation not only of philosophy, and the philosopher, but probably of marxism as well.

But what of non-marxist radicals - can there even be such a thing? The humanization, or de-academicization, and the sorting out of philosophy from ideology, having realised that there is no Truth, only truth for something and someone, wouldn't come amiss here either. But even after that, is there any framework for philosophy apart from marxism where thought must needs issue in what is done? Or is the only alternative for the non-marxist radical philosopher the much lowlier aspiration of setting a personal day-to-day example of reasonableness, arising from philosophical rationality, and sympathy, arising from philosophical understanding; is this all there is for

him in the way of moral-political action grounded in his philosophy? No doubt there is room for people who adopt certain media-psychoanalysis, religion, art-as instruments for trying to change the world, and who make use of philosophy as an aid to their understanding of these media. But if that's what you want to do, why become a philosopher? Why leave psychoanalysis, art, religion, or whatever, for philosophy? Because if you do, then you're left with exactly those questions that got radical philosophy going.

Is non-marxist philosophy just a parasitic fascination? Is non-marxist philosophy of life, perhaps like Russell's just a sentimental misapprehension, neither "philosophy", nor "of life"? Does Stoppard's view of literary criticism fit such philosophy? - "It remains the case than an academic preoccupation with the creative work of other people has become so widespread and obsessive that the art of criticism is forced, out of self-respect, to pretend to a relevance beyond the confines of its admittedly sprawling ramifications. This puts an unwelcome and unnecessary strain upon a pastime fit for educated men of private means and studious bent but no particular talent; the scale and volume of the enterprise is now so great that its true place in the system of cultural values has been obscured to the point where public money supports it and talented men are drawn to it... I can imagine no use or virtue in it other than that Professor Brown is, I suppose, having a good time..."¹

¹"Playwrights and Professors", in 'DOERS AND THINKERS'

STAFF AND STUDENTS

Keith Graham

Radical Philosophy 3 carried a report (p44) purporting to come from the Radical Philosophy discussion group which met in Bristol during the summer term, 1972. It was said to be the group's view of these meetings that 'the standard of discussion was kept low due to deep divisions between the students involved (all undergraduates) and the more liberal staff. What emerged was that certain members of staff were keen to identify with the movement, but still found it necessary to appear as authorities on all topics discussed, even when it was clear that they were not. The students involved came to deeply resent this attitude.'

I should at once declare an interest. I am almost certainly one of the members of staff referred to, and I suffered deep resentment on being labelled a liberal. But even leaving personal feelings aside, I believe the report should not go unchallenged. Apart from its inaccuracy (postgraduates also attended these meetings) it is not a report from the group, but rather the work of one particular member of it. He seems, moreover, to have been unsuccessful in gauging the sense of the meetings in question. Having traced as many as possible of those who attended them I have discovered only one person who believes that the above description is a fair one. Fruitful meetings continued in Bristol during the autumn term with no sign of deep divisions or deep resentment.

It has been put to me that even considered as one person's reaction the report was worth publishing. I agree. There is also a second reason why it should not be disregarded. It might be seen as a particular manifestation of a more general attitude which is found, for example, amongst some radical students. This is the view that an important analogue of the class struggle is reproduced in universities, with lecturers in the role of the bourgeoisie and students as the proletariat (I should stress that I have no idea whether the author of the above report holds the general view in question. It is in any case worth examining on its own account.)

It will not do to dismiss this as a fantasy produced by the post-adolescent rebellion against public school and a rich father. Even if that were a correct account of the genesis of the belief, we should still want to know if anything in reality corresponds to it. And certainly a plausible picture can be built up of the lecturer as a figure of authority, if not an authoritarian figure, who is possessed of a power which he has every reason to keep and which is backed up by a whole network of institutions. On the other side is the student, in a totally subordinate position, and forced to do whatever he can to break the lecturer's monopoly of power and knowledge.

If this parallel holds, it is likely to have important practical consequences. In the class struggle itself, the interests of the owner and non-owner of the means of life are diametrically and inherently opposed: it is in the interests of the capitalist to screw everything he can out of the worker, and vice versa. Perhaps then, it may be argued that a similar position obtains in the university? Though a student may make temporary alliances with his teacher (as in Radical Philosophy?) he must ultimately remain opposed to him, and have no illusions about cooperation and joint ventures. Of course he may find the odd teacher who manifests total indifference to the power and authority associated with his role, but (someone might argue) the fact that an individual is not *conscious* of the interest he has *qua* member of a certain group does not gainsay the fact that he has that interest - in the same way as one comes across students who show no concern over their oppression by those who teach them. And in any case what is true of isolated individuals may not hold at all for the whole class.

Just because the parallel would have such implications I believe it is important to see where it fails. At the school I went to, the headmaster was keen on fostering such things as house loyalties on the grounds (curiously similar to those involved in the parallel) that the school was a reflexion or microcosm of society at large. The difficulty which such a suggestion runs into is the fact that the school is an institution *within* society, and that its artificially created loyalties may be affected or come into conflict with loyalties which pre-exist in the wider world. So it is with the present parallel. If the lecturer is thought of as some kind of pale imitation of the capitalist, it has to be remembered that he wears this guise in a world where he is actually a member of the proletariat - i.e. he has to sell his labour power in order to gain access to the means of life. Of course he does not fit the music-hall image of the proletarian, but then an ever-decreasing number of proletarians do. Thus it turns out that in the wider context from which the parallel is drawn the interest of lecturer and student do, after all, coincide.

What I am suggesting is that if we recall the points of contact which universities have with the wider society, we shall recognise a more fundamental and important similarity of interest between students and staff, a similarity which renders the attempted parallel misleading. But a defender of the parallel may argue that stressing the points of contact has precisely the reverse effect and shows its validity. He may say that it is sheer naïveté to refer to university lecturers as members of the proletariat: they are 'intellectuals', they are members of the Establishment, they are close to the centres of power; Hence they will identify with the interests of the ruling class and one cannot expect them to do otherwise.

Even if such counter-suggestions were appropriate they would not leave the parallel intact. Once we begin to place the university in its wider context then we have to do the same for students, and many (if not most) of them too will become members of the Establishment - lawyers, doctors, civil servants etc. But are the counter-suggestions in fact appropriate? Of course governments do not pour millions of pounds into universities because they think it is nice for people

to be cultured, and universities do serve the needs of capitalist society. But so, for that matter, do steel plants, police stations and printing works. In no case does it follow that the people who work in these places have good reason to identify with the interests of those who employ them. University teachers are relatively privileged members of the proletariat and they conduct their wage-bargaining in a gentlemanly way, but the crucial fact is that they are nevertheless in a position which makes such bargaining necessary over and over again.

Finally, I may be accused of an unsympathetic interpretation of the counter-suggestions. They are not to be construed as *endorsing* this identification with the interests of the ruling class; rather as stating the regrettable but inevitable fact that this body of intellectuals, because of their position, are bound to adopt a reactionary stance. My reply is that this is an interesting speculation. But we have no chance of judging its truth while only a vanishingly small minority of 'real', horny-handed proletarians wish to abolish the relationship which gives rise to their subordination. If/when they decide in large numbers that they wish to end the wages system then we shall be able to see whether intellectuals lag behind in class consciousness. But one should beware of the dangers of self-fulfilling prophecy in this area.

The moral of all this is that what is common between staff and students is of greater significance than what separates them (just as the long-term common interest of lorry drivers and dockers is more important than any short-term conflicting interest). To go looking for deep divisions within one section of the working class is to ensure that capitalism is with us for another thousand years. One might put the point in the form of an injunction: Radical staff and students unite. You have a whole world to win. You have nothing to lose but your distinction.

AGITPROP

Agitprop's collective is on the move. Every revolutionary movement demands increased flexibility and a mastering of new skills. While we each feel the need to change in different ways, we feel we must end our own involvement in the projects occurring here and help others in the libertarian movement who want to carry on with political education and information work. We have made this break reluctantly and realistically after about 6 months of discussions.

We feel encouraged by the growth of several non-profit, community shops outside London, as we feel they are concrete examples of efforts to decentralise. We feel it is important for groups and individuals both to supply these bookshops with new and regular publications, and to make an effort to get their books and pamphlets from a regional shop rather than from London.

Once we are clear about the effects of the repression we are facing we will be able to let people know what we are planning to do. Pauline Conroy and Andy "Jeff" Ellsmore are facing a charge on a police set-up for conspiracy to get guns, and the Home Office is unwilling to give Ruth and Harris a visa. This restricts our planning in part. You should be hearing from us soon on this.

For the fortnight from Jan. 15th - Jan. 28th the shop will be closed as we prepare for closing down, though we will continue to send out orders that reach us by Feb. 5th. After Feb. 5th Agitprop is effectively closed.

A last literature list has been prepared and is available with a fuller statement on our changes by sending an s.a.e. to 248 Bethnal Green Road, London, E.2.