EDITORIAL

THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

You will certainly have heard by now that 1989 is the bi-centenary of the French Revolution. In many quarters there will be events – be they sentimental, thought-provoking, spectacular or brash – to mark the occasion. All in all, in this issue you will find various pieces referring to the French Revolution or related topics. There is Chris Arthur's analysis, which interprets how, for Hegel, the Revolution might be said to bring reason and freedom into history. My own article discusses how the evolution of historical writing over recent decades has conceptualised those involved as free agents bringing the Revolution about. Besides that, Jean Grimshaw discusses Mary Wollstonecraft, who was herself actively involved in the contemporary defence of the Revolution. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, argues Jean, needs to be understood historically; it was an attempt to progress beyond 18th-century gendered notions of distinct virtues for men and for women—though these also bear on the issues facing modern feminism.

All these assume (as does the marking of the bi-centenary itself) the importance of properly appropriating history in order to understand ideas, theories and arguments before us today. And there is more which involves that topic. Ian Hunt's case for a distinct concept of labour-power responds to recent literature, which has tried to reduce the idea to other terms. But he, too, is in the business of preserving some part of the Left's intellectual inheritance. Rosalyn Diprose argues that Nietzsche should be understood as an attack on the 19th-century unified bourgeois male subject, because, if that is correct, there is in his work a source that contemporary feminism may draw upon.

These articles advocate an historical understanding of thinking from the past: both for its own sake and as a stage in obtaining some insight into truths and issues for the present day. It is not surprising to find such discussion in a magazine of the Left. For the Left belongs in a tradition where (notably, but not solely in the work of Hegel and Marx) politics and intellectual activity are held to belong together within the historical progress (or inertia) of society as a whole. Thus, Sean Sayers provides a suitable counterpoint to the historical concerns of other articles. He claims that, if knowledge is understood as a social phenomenon, the errors of the past are causally related to reality and therefore contain within them distorted truth. In sum, over and above discussion of one crucial historical event (the French Revolution), thoughts on the weight to be accorded to history itself run through this issue.

Political conservatism, of course, certainly realizes the weight of the past; though it is choosy about what it will preserve intact. The right-wing government in power in the United Kingdom is all too well aware of the use of history. History has recently been admitted to the new, centrally determined school curriculum. But, from recent statements by our education minister, it appears that this status is given only on condition that history forsakes the subversive empathising of the 'New History' (which was developed in the 1960s to broaden the subject with a perspective 'from below'). Schools must return to 'traditional British history', which (like the 'whig' history discredited decades ago) presents 'the plain facts' of our blessed progress to become what Britain is today: a great democracy and paragon of all that is just and good in society. History, then, is bound to provide live political material. The question is: How is it to be used, by whom and for whose political benefit?

But this poses a problem for us as intellectuals: If we are being careful to remain aware that history always has contemporary political weight, what space will we give to objective investigation of historical reality? We want history to be put to the political uses we believe to be good; but we also want to retain a loyalty to the realities of the historical past.

Of course, once we take due account of the vicissitudes that surround all real research – be it historical, scientific or sociological – this emerges straightaway as a naive juxtaposition. Passive dedication to the facts is not an option. At the very least, we approach topics in history with a complex, politically sensitive selection of interests and conceptual apparatus. On the other hand, an obstinate determination to find only what most pleases us in the historical past *is* a real temptation – and one which studies of the French Revolution (on the Right and the Left) have often succumbed to. Yet, in the long run, to give in to that is about as sensible as the posture of those who, instead of admitting to oncoming deafness, insist that no-one around is speaking as clearly as they used to.

It is right and proper (indeed inevitable) that we should look at the past using those ideas that seem important to us politically: ideas such as the struggle between classes; the possibility of democracy; the mechanisms of oppression; the effect of the economic structure and of power; the conditions of social progress. But it would be both stupid and self-deluding, if we employed those ideas to construct an account of the historical past in which we refused to recognise unexpected or disagreeable reality. The great revolution of 1789 put democracy and self-determination on the historical map in Europe. But it also threw up dissension, civil war, Terror and a drastic set-back for the very ideas of democracy and progress. Like much other history, when considered coolly, as it ought to be by the Left, the Revolution has to be not only an inspiring topic, but also a chastening one.

Noel Parker