

'POLITICS AND THE PRODUCTION OF THEORETICAL JOURNALS'

In February 1979, the Radical Publications Group organised a conference at the ICA in London about current problems and opportunities for left publishing in Britain (see *Radical Philosophy* 22). The conference concentrated on questions of marketing (how to get a firm subscription base; how to expand shop sales; how to improve distribution), and of access (how unions might break the right-wing newspaper monopolies; prospects of state support for small publications, etc). The RPG has continued discussing and planning in both these areas since.

But the February conference also revealed, negatively, a range of problems of left publishing that could not be caught in the nets of 'markets' or 'access'. These elusive, fugitive questions have to do with the quality of a publication's relations to its audience, rather than the sheer size of its sales - with the kinds of encouragements or discouragements they give to potential readers and writers. It seemed that most editorial collectives had run up against such problems in some guise or other, usually in debates over the use of long, difficult words, or the balance between 'introductory' and 'advanced' articles, or between translations and 'local produce'; it seemed also that many collectives had had nasty, hurtful, confusing and unedifying fights about them. But it was evident that no one had managed to think them through in a clear and responsible way.

So after the February conference, a small working group was formed (Valerie Walkerdine, Mark Nash, Jonathan Ree, Julian Henriques, Wendy Hollway) to prepare a meeting to fill this gap. The day school on 'Politics and the Production of Theoretical Journals' was eventually held at Birkbeck College London on Saturday 22 September 1979.

Recognising that the questions we needed to discuss are hard to lay hold on, we decided that we could not be content to list some topics and hope that when people turned up on the day, there would be an effective, spontaneous discussion of them - the most likely result of that would be a voluble and confident discussion of different and easier questions, less slippery and more familiar than the ones we wanted to consider. For the same reason, we did not want to invite outside speakers to give expert lectures on the problem - they too would be likely to veer off into the 'wrong' problems. Instead, we held a series of discussions within the working group, to sharpen our collective sensitivity to the problems, and eventually divided the area into four topics, allocating each of them to one member of the working group, who prepared a talk on the topic in consultation with the group as a whole.

It seems to have worked. On the day, about forty people turned up to hear four carefully thought-out, co-ordinated talks, and to participate in surrounding discussion. The first talk surveyed different kinds of left journals in Britain since the 1930s, ranging from those which aimed to create a specific and necessarily small 'intelligentsia' (*Scrutiny*, *Politics and Letters*, and *New Left Review* under Perry Anderson) to those which hoped to address a mass movement such as the *New Reasoner*, the early

issues of *New Left Review*, and, most impressively, the numerous publications associated with the Left Book Club, with its tens of thousands of members, thousands of local study groups, and the problem of not being able to accommodate their readers' rallies in such small premises as the Albert Hall. Why, we wondered, is such a movement impossible today? ... if indeed it is. And in any case, what did it achieve, apart from making us feel envious forty years later.

The next session dealt with the character of the theories propagated in left journals over the past ten years, and especially the way in which the pedestalling of Althusser caused a lurch towards increasingly abstract philosophical questions, glibly justified in portentous terms of 'politics' and 'theoretical practice' - a phraseology whose hermetically sealed tautologies effectively suffocated all reflection on the practical effects and contexts of journal production and of left theoretical writing generally.

The third session opened some psychological perspectives, pointing out that anyone who engages in intellectual work in general, or left theoretical writing in particular, has to have, or adopt, certain forms of subjectivity, or neurosis, or emotions, and urging that it is artificial and indefensible to treat these matters as if they were irrelevant to the politics of left publishing.

The final session broached the problem of 'audience theory', and defined various choices that writers make about the roles in which they cast their readers - as admiring, humbled spectators, as potential participants or co-conspirators, and so forth - choices which, nearly always, are passed over unconsciously by left theoretical writers, and taken by default - the result almost invariably being unthinking mimicry of the audience attitudes implicit in orthodox academic writing.

The meeting ended on an interrogative note, with a recognition of choices where formerly determinism has seemed to rule. Someone in the audience said it had been an exceptional day - thoughtful, explorative, informative and undogmatic, and quite unlike other left meetings in their experience, and so on ... well perhaps my memory exaggerates, but it was a compliment that the organising group did not turn away. But there was a more sombre side to the proceedings - as we noticed when we reflected that most of those with effective control of left publications had not bothered to turn up. We were in fact a rather specialised group, with a strong representation of people who are completely pissed off with the academic drift evident in the recent development of left theoretical publications, and little confidence of any power to change it: in which case, this was really a dirge for defunct aspirations. We shall see.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

If possible, send 3 copies of articles, clearly typed on A4 paper, preferably double-spaced, not reduced xeroxes, and include a one-paragraph summary.

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