

NEWS

Chesterfield Socialist Conference

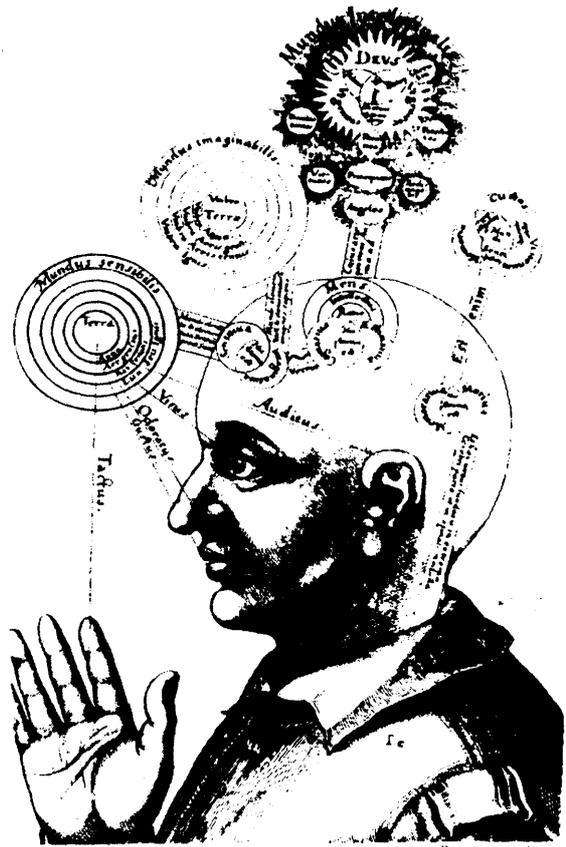
Called by the Campaign Group of Labour MPs, the Conference of Socialist Economists, and the Socialist Society, this conference was intended to reaffirm and redefine the socialist project in Britain for the 1990s. In his opening address, Ralph Miliband compared it to the great Leeds Convention of 1917 when socialists met to discuss the Russian revolution. In fact, history was back in fashion all weekend. Everyone was comparing the stock market crash of the previous week to 1929. The long-awaited collapse of capitalism, it seemed to many, had once again finally arrived. Whatever the truth of the comparison, there were certainly many clashes of the old and the new at Chesterfield. Just what is to be the outcome of these clashes was the central question that the conference posed.

The three organising groups probably had quite different expectations of what would come out of the conference, and many of the 2,000 people who attended certainly did. A set of briefing papers were issued (available from *Interlink*, 9 Poland Street, London W1V 3DG), but unfortunately these were little discussed. The three main themes of the conference, discussed in parallel sessions, were *Internationalism*, *Democracy*, and the *Economy*, and although there was some good discussion of the problems that socialists faced in these areas, there was also a great deal of restatement of set positions. The main session on the economy was a good example. Robin Murray spoke at length and in detail on the massive restructuring currently being undergone by the world economy, its effect on Britain, and its implications for a socialist economic policy; with particular reference to the Labour Party's fear of intervention in industry at the point of production, and how this must, and could, be overcome. Yet none of the subsequent contributions from the floor, which were admittedly limited by the time Murray's speech had taken up, even addressed themselves to what had been said.

Too many people at the conference, it seems, wanted it to be a rally of the faithful, rather than the beginning of a socialist *glassnost*. The 'new realism' of the Labour Party came in for much criticism, as did the Euro-communism of the new soft left. A number of left-wing Labour MPs (Eric Heffer, in particular) used the occasion to call for more struggle against Thatcherism and revisionism. But this seemed to beg the question rather than answer it. The whole problem of precisely why people are no longer engaged in struggle, why the political terrain has shifted, and how socialism can take stock of its failures and move forward again, was never really addressed. Changes in the working class and the trade union movement were not generally accepted as being indicative of a major transformation of the political terrain. Action, rather than analysis, was what was constantly demanded.

The conference was notable, however, for the wide range of its participants. Labour Party members, trade unionists, local councillors, MPs, old-age pensioners, Green Party members, and observers from Nicaragua, South Africa and Germany, along with a variety of far left activists were all present. Interestingly, the average age of participants seemed quite high. One group which didn't appear to be under-represented though were the Socialist Workers Party who, along with the Revolutionary Communist Party, Workers Power, and one or two other

groups, attempted to block all entrances to the conference with newspaper sellers. These groups were very vociferous on the first day, but kept a lower profile after several women speakers told them that they were no longer prepared to put up with the brow-beating fundamentalism of their arcane breed of political behaviour, which had seriously inhibited any genuine discussion in the early sessions.



However, there were a large number of workshops where interesting and lively debate did take place, showing that beyond the smaller, organised factions there is a good deal of rethinking going on. Ecological questions and the problems of racial discrimination were acutely posed as issues which go beyond traditional socialist demands, but these were not given as much space as the set-piece speeches from the platform. There was criticism of the dominance of the platform over discussion, and this was somewhat rectified on the second day.

The biggest gain of the conference will probably prove to be the many useful contacts which were made. At a large meeting of the women present it was decided to set up an umbrella organisation, including Women against Pit Closures, which will press for 50% representation and speaking time at the next conference. The conference concluded with proposals to establish a 'directory' of left organisations which could form the basis of a network of contacts, and to organise a series of smaller, regional conferences leading up to another large conference in Chesterfield next May.

In this one is reminded of the early days of 'Beyond the Fragments', and of the first Socialist Society conference. Both

of these movements, however, declined because the common ground they assumed proved to be theoretical rather than practical. It remains to be seen whether or not the Socialist Conference can overcome this problem, and the differences between its participants that were apparent all weekend, and become the force in British politics which its sponsors would like it to be. That it exists, and that it is attempting to do so, however, can only be a good thing for those interested in the growth of independent but united socialist movement in Britain.

Richard Osborne

Realism Conference

It is a well-known fact that Sydney, Australia has two of everything, and that the two always oppose one another, making the city a living proof of the existence of contradictions in reality. Hence, it was surprising to find both Sydney representatives agreeing on the non-threatening, non-elitist and non-sexist atmosphere of the 1987 Realism Conference, held at the University of Sussex from 6th to 9th September. Much of the credit is undoubtedly due to the organisers, Roy Bhaskar, Sue Clegg and William Outhwaite. The achievement was all the more appropriate as the major theme of the Conference was Explanations of Women's Oppression. There were also plenary sessions on The Nature of Natural and Social Laws, and Explanation in Space and Time, and workshops on Realism and Psychology, Realism and Culture, and Realism, Politics and Political Economy. The speakers at the plenaries were William Outhwaite, Alan Chalmers, Michele Barrett, Sylvia Walby, Andrew Sayer, Sue Clegg and Russell Keat. The Conference as a whole left a strong impression that scientific realism has reached a curious stage in its development. The old enemy, 'positivism', has been slain, or is at any rate defunct, and yet it is by no means the case that we are all realists now. Indeed, Michele Barrett, in the course of an illuminating talk, stressed how little current trends in social theory are realist in inspiration. In expanding the point, she spoke of the women's movement in Britain as facing a choice 'between Foucault and Derrida'—a formulation which brought home to some in her audience that things are more desperate than they thought. The way forward which seemed to have most support involved a move away from general theory towards more concrete analyses informed by, and dependent on, realist ideas. In the meantime, the morale of the Standing Conference on Realism remains high, and planning for next year's meeting is already well-advanced. The themes will be What is Realism?, Nation-state and Territoriality, and Realism and Biology. There is surely a great deal here that must interest readers of *Radical Philosophy*. Information is available from Anne Witz, Department of Sociology, University of Exeter.

Joe McCarney

Obituary: Raya Dunayevskaya

Raya Dunayevskaya (1 May 1910 – 9 June 1987) died last summer. She was an indefatigable agitator and Marxist scholar. Her work is rooted in her rediscovery of Marx's Marxism in its original form as a 'new Humanism' and in her recreation of that philosophy for our age as 'Marxist Humanism'—that is how she is characterised in *News & Letters*, a socialist

newspaper she founded in 1955 with Charles Denby, a black worker. A 'child of the Russian revolution', she was brought to the United States at age 12. She promptly led her first strike—the 1924 Cregier Elementary School walk-out in protest against corporal punishment and anti-semitism. Expelled from the youth group of the Communist Party in 1928, she joined the Trotskyist movement, and in 1937 travelled to Mexico to become Russian-language secretary to Leon Trotsky. She broke with Trotsky at the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact. In the '40s, as leaders of the Johnson-Forest tendency in the *Fourth International*, Dunayevskaya ('Freddie Forest') and C. L. R. James ('J. R. Johnson') developed the theory that the USSR was 'state-capitalist'. Following the model of Lenin in 1914, they hoped to renovate Marxist theory by going right back to Hegel's *Logic*. C. L. R.'s *Notes on Dialectics* came out in 1948 (republished 1980).

Dunayevskaya's first book *Marxism and Freedom* (1958) (with a friendly Preface by Marcuse) had appended to it the first English translations of materials from Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* and Lenin's notes on Hegel. The book was well ahead of its time in its scholarship, and infectious in its enthusiasm for the original reading of Marxism it provides.

Marxism and Freedom, and also *Philosophy and Revolution* (1973), were republished in 1982 by Harvester/Humanities. In the same year there appeared *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, and in 1985, *Women's Liberation and the Dialectics of Revolution: Reaching for the Future*.

An archive of Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist Humanism has been established at Wayne State University, Detroit, which offers a micro-film at \$100. (It excludes the above-mentioned books but has everything else including unpublished material.) *News & Letters* have published a guide to the collection.

In all her work she is concerned to establish links between theory and practice. For her, one feels, the revolutionary struggle is Hegel's absolute negativity. Whatever one thinks of the results, Dunayevskaya's determination to make the thought of Hegel and Marx live is impressive. We have lost a brilliantly combative writer.

Chris Arthur

Gender and Social Policy

The Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bristol is offering a new Masters and Diploma in *Gender and Social Policy*, commencing October 1988. The course is full-time over one year or part-time over two and involves three seminar courses over two terms, plus a short dissertation for M.Sc. candidates. The course will draw on staff from five departments in the Faculty. Teaching will include research methods in the social sciences and students will be encouraged to work on projects which have policy implications. Applications are especially invited from mature students with some experience of or interest in equal opportunities, women's development, training, and education, family and health policies. Details available from Ann Warren-Cox, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 1TH, England.