

Letters

Dear Editors

Jerry M Cohen in his discussion of Roy Edgley's article 'Reason and Violence', presents himself as both a victim of, and propagandist for, a brand of double-think increasingly popular amongst our so-called radicals.

On the one hand, he argues that we should have no truck with the meaning of words (a pursuit which he derogatorily categorises both as 'historical' and also as 'a concern with timeless essences'); yet, on the other hand, he apparently attaches no minor importance to their meaning when used by himself as labels:

he talks historically, as liberals do, about the meaning of the word. (my emphasis)

On the one hand, he suggests that it is a mistake to focus on 'the most abstract, rather than the most concrete description of an act' (and, presumably, this applies also to descriptions of 'mystification'; while, on the other hand, he advocates that we see society not as a set of persons, but as:

a system of social relations into which various persons may at times enter.

This particular piece of abstraction is of course necessary for

any pro-violence argument such as Jerry M Cohen's. Known as dehumanising the enemy, this ploy facilitates the passage to violence, especially when accompanied by such mystificatory phrases as 'depoliticises the issue', 'the grim reality of oppression and institutionalised violence' and 'there are situations in which the only adequate, human response is a violent one'.

But perhaps we do Jerry M Cohen a disservice. Perhaps, despite his assertion that none of what he says is 'meant in any sense as a glorification of violence', he really does intend his to be an argument pro-violence. After all, he does demand, in a fit of paternalism, that Roy Edgley's paper should be about 'what in these definite material circumstances is the role of violence', which seems to suggest that some sort of violence is necessary anyway.

The subject of Roy Edgley's paper - can violence be reasonable - is, it seems, unworthy of discussion. Apparently, Jerry M Cohen has already settled this question and not, as he makes clear, by recourse to the type of argument advanced by Roy Edgley, viz. that although harm, hurt, discomfort or inconvenience is necessarily involved in an act of violence and are necessarily reasons against it, there may be

overriding reasons in favour of it. This type of thinking is rejected by Jerry M Cohen since it is part of 'the liberal hoax'.

If Jerry M Cohen really has settled this question and has found that some form of violence is necessary, he might perhaps let us know how he has done this; or are we perhaps to take his justification to be the argument he appears to advance in his discussion of Roy Edgley's paper; that as long as we label people 'oppressors', 'liberals', 'capitalists' or whatever, without regard for the meaning of the word, and see them as systems not as persons, harming or hurting them is no reason why violence should not be perpetrated against them.

If this is 'thinking which takes its start from concrete historical realities and possibilities', then the 'radical' Jerry M Cohen might like to know, before organising the bonfire of all literature containing 'liberal muck', that such arguments were indeed concrete historical realities - about forty years ago in fact, although it seems a shame that Mr Cohen, of all people, needs to be so reminded.

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Reviews

Popper for the people

Bryan Magee: *Popper*, Fontana Modern Masters, £0.40.

Bryan Magee's book about Popper is not going to get a good review from me. I should explain, before hostile readers jump to unwarranted conclusions, that this is not because I am so prejudiced as to think that a good book could not be written about Popper: some of what I think such a book should contain will be evident from my remarks below. The aim of Magee's book, to be a popular exposition, rather than the little gem some other writers in the series have produced, is admirable. Magee feels that Popper ought to be a 'household name among the educated', and sets out to give 'a bold clear outline of Popper's thought which exhibits its systematic unity'. He does succeed, in one respect, at least, in this latter intention, as we shall see. However, the phrase 'among the

educated' is a give-away: the very style of his presentation belies the author's avowed intention. Popper's ideas are not set out as grist for thought and discussion, but as achievements to be revered. This is shown, too, in the neglect of well known criticisms and difficulties to which Popper's ideas have been subject, some of which I will mention below.

The sycophantic flavour of his recent Sunday colour-supplement article also pervades Magee's book. Names dropped in the first two pages of the introduction include: Sir Peter Medawar; Jacques Monod; Sir John Eccles; Sir Herman Bondi; Sir Ernst Gombrich; Anthony Crosland; Sir Edward (now Lord) Boyle; Lord Clark of Civilization. Adler and Schoenberg are also mentioned, but in the normal manner, without christian names (or titles!), presumably because they are too far removed from the contemporary scene for their names to potently confer that middlebrow élan

striven after by the gossip columns of quality newspapers. The exposition throughout the book abounds in superlatives and throw-away references to issues of profound significance, well taken, I suppose, by 'the educated'. The half-educated, on the other hand, are not encouraged to emulate the author's facility with ideas, but to admire the show from their position in the suburbs of intellectual life.

Even uneducated readers might be excused if they were to wonder quite why Popper's ideas are worthy of such exaggerated respect, since they are so notably lacking in subtlety. It would be too much to expect, though, that a book like this would say that Popper is important precisely because commonplace ideas are elaborated and treated systematically in his work. A less serious writer than Popper would have lost heart long ago, and a less scrupulous apologist sidestepped a dozen of the difficulties Popper