

SILVER LININGS**Ed G Bridges and R Brunt**

Lawrence and Wishart 1981

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In these difficult times, a book with the title *Silver Linings: some strategies for the Eighties* will surely be pounced on like an England goal in the World Cup! Especially as it is a collection of papers based on talks given at the CUL of July 1980 — which was itself a bit of a silver lining. The editors claim that the title is not meant to imply 'cheerily naive optimism' — the contributors hope, however, to reveal, in the hearts of the dark clouds of this particular time of political heavy weather, 'a sense of continuous struggle — whether on existing or on new fronts and terrains'. In these struggles they are delineating, they are all themselves partisans, and it is this, along with the fact that they take up different positions about the nature and role of these struggles, that gives this book a real sense of purpose and drive.

The book is a development of the concept of the broad democratic alliance and as such makes quite a neat and integrated package, incorporating a number of perspectives — feminist, gay and black — and a number of strategies in important areas of struggle — the social services, the media and Northern



Ireland. The final three articles are more general and take up some of the themes raised in the earlier papers.

And there are common themes which run through the book: the need, in the face of the populist policies of Thatcherism, for a renewal of the Left, and for the generation of

a revolutionary practice and programme of a new kind; the need to build revolutionary consciousness by 'recognising, acting upon and linking reactions to different forms of exploitation and oppression, and not attempting to reduce all contradictions to the single common denominator of something alleged to be the unified class interest'; the need for the aims of various movements against oppression to be interwoven with those of the labour movement, while at the same time remaining autonomous. These themes are particularly important at a time when the Left seems to be floundering in its fightback. It is very tempting to revert to tried and trusted slogans which predate the broad democratic alliance (eg, the prominent Communist Party slogan on the recent unemployment march in Glasgow — 'Miners Show The Way!' — though stirring in itself and having a certain validity within the trade union movement, didn't have a lot of relevance to the isolated single parent in the housing estate, or the unemployed school leaver . . .)

That the broad democratic alliance (BDA) needs this kind of serious treatment and discussion there can be no doubt. 'Broad' is an adjective that has entered into the consciousness of the Left. 'Democratic', also, is a term that has been fairly well

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incorporated. It is the 'Alliance' part that has the Left at sixes and sevens. And so it is often easier to pay lip service to the general concept of BDA rather than work out its real implications.

Tricia Davis's credentials as a partisan were recently underlined when she spoke, on behalf of the womens group in Birmingham, to the People's March For Jobs when it entered that city. Her paper, 'Stand By Your Men? Feminism and Socialism in the Eighties', deals directly with the question of alliances. Drawing on a wide range of current experiences and campaigns, she airs some of the problems involved as well as drawing a clear perspective for action.

This is a wide-ranging paper, however, and very thought-provoking and competent. In many ways, it is a keynote article in that it takes as its starting point the *British Road to Socialism*, but proceeds to develop it in a creative way. Her passage on patriarchy is particularly good. Arguing for the need for a theory of patriarchy, she says '... patriarchy is not just an "issue" but a fundamental contradiction in society. The WLM, therefore, cannot simply be listed along with environmental, peace and solidarity movements'. Nor can feminism and socialism achieve a fitting together, as Sheila Rowbotham has implied, by emphasising the organisational principles of feminism 'at the expense of a fuller account of the anti-patriarchal quality of our polities'. That this question needs to be reopened and debated is obvious. I'm sure I am not alone in my experience of male activists who can still not bring themselves to the point of acknowledging that men are the instruments and agents of women's oppression, let alone discuss the processes by which this takes place. These men might be re-assured by the fact that, as Tricia says, '...we need a theory of patriarchy not so that we can discount the good and loving relationships that exist between men and women, nor so that we can point to the irredeemable hopelessness of the male species ...' but 'so that we can understand how it is and do something to change the fact that ... in learning to love men, we also learn to subordinate ourselves to them ...'

Tricia Davis' paper puts the relationship between feminism and socialism in its current political setting, and, in a very practical sense, charts a path for it through the under-currents of economism, the rapids of revolutionary feminism and the jungle of Left sexist practice ...

Unlike this paper, which is an overview of feminist politics for the eighties, Richard Dyer's paper, 'Getting Over The Rainbow' is essentially an analysis of a current sub-

-culture. As such it is fascinating and illuminating to anyone who is interested in the apparent contradictions which seem to emerge from the gay culture. He opens up a whole number of questions about how a culture, which is defined by the sexuality of its members, responds to the fact. As he says, the women's movement has for a long time recognised the political importance of the body and one's control over it, so I found his section on body politics particularly interesting and would like to have it more fully discussed.' ... "Body Politics" is not an idle phrase. It points to the way in which society attempts to make over every person into a cog in an efficient system that at the same time fragments any control or knowledge we may have over our bodies ...'

Amongst the other goodies in this book is a marvellous analysis of the ways in which 'the media-sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously — define and construct the question of race in such a way as to reproduce the ideologies of racism'. Stuart Hall, in his usual challenging style, also tackles the problems which arise when the Left tries to intervene in order to undermine these unquestioned racist assumptions.

Dave Cook takes on the job of pulling together the themes of the book and also of placing the Left in its current wider political context. In a well argued passage he states that a 'Labour government of a new type' is not something that will flow as a matter of course from an internal palace coup, but requires a significant shift in the political consciousness of millions of people. He argues strongly for the important contribution the Communist Party can make in this complex process of change. But to generate the broad democratic alliance that will be the vehicle of change requires new orientations on the part of the Communist Party and the Left. '... it is often people's consciousness of oppression, for example racial oppression, rather than their class exploitation, which is the key politicising factor. We remain at the level of cardboard cut-out politics if our analysis is just restricted to "workers" involved in the "labour movement" who are only interested in "class questions", and others who are only concerned with "peripheral" issues ... The significance of the concept (of BDA) lies in its implications for achieving political change in the working class rather than as a description of the working class and its allies'.

Ouanie Bain

Memoirs of a Socialist Businessman, reviewed in our June issue is available from Merlin Press, 3 Manchester Road, London E14.

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