

NEWS



FOUNDATIONS OF HOPE:

Report on the *Radical Philosophy* Conference,
5 November 1988

It was to be expected. A splendidly organised Conference, loads of interesting discussions. Good comradely meetings, friends everywhere. But I came away feeling that the title had somehow turned against itself. Not so much *Politics, Reason, Hope as Politics (but let's not lose ourselves in the concrete), Reason (well, as long as you first say that you've no basis for asserting it), and Just a little bit of despair*. That's not the organisers' fault, it is part of the very air I seem to be breathing a lot of recently.

More than 300 people queued up at the start, an awful lot with prior registrations. Now that's quite a crowd. It made me think nervously of football and the national membership scheme. Soon I suppose it'll be signed-up conference fans only, and we'll have to have a computerised card for attenders. Still at least we can get rid of persistent hecklers that way, or ban them from away-conferences.... Jay Bernstein and Carole Pateman kicked off, Jay talking about the concept of 'rights' in Marx, and Marx's attack in *The Jewish Question* on the notion of the 'Rights of Man'. It was a rich vein he tapped, ending in a series of provocative propositions about the idea of 'rights within a community'. Good rich philosophical stuff, just ripe for having the foundations knocked out of it. Carole set about the job. Really, can we still talk with such glibness about the rights of 'man', after twenty years of third-wave feminism? Point taken, and she did go on to argue that inside all the social contractors and natural righters there was a clear case of gendering. Yet here, and again later, I waited to see what piles would be put down instead. No go. This was to be a conference without Foundations.

The first set of workshops had ringing titles: Paine and Wollstonecraft, Hegel and Burke, Lenin and Gramsci, Marx and Mill, Colonialism and Liberalism. I went to Lenin and Gramsci. Francis Mulhern did a brave job arguing in defence of Lenin's notion of the Party as memory/organiser of the leading elements of the Class, and even pointed to the hints in him of the Party as precursor, in its internal relations, of the society that is to come. The positivity of it stood out against much else in the conference, and really only surfaced again at the end in Istvan Mezsaros. David Forgacs on Gramsci seemed more in tune with the profound wish of the day to be complex, as he explored G's ideas on intellectuals and Italy. One thing did stay with me, though, and that was his interesting insistence that Gramsci's Italy was much more Eastern and undeveloped than we normally credit. Discussion, interesting and sharp, if a little desultory. A problem, perhaps, of two speakers per workshop.

Friends tell me that the session with Anthony Arblaster (Tom Paine) and Rosalind Delmar (Mary Wollstonecraft) was a good 'un, Anthony boldly rescuing the radical bits (like, advocacy of state pensions) inside old Tom, and Rosalind hailing the various 'Marys' that interpreters have made of her. Then there was the first of the 'meetings' between post-modernism and 'the rest', as

Robin Blackburn talked from his new book, arguing about the part the slaves themselves played in determining the abolition of slavery; and Gayatri Spivak opened her first front on colonialist mentality. The others happened, though I don't know of them, but no doubt gave delight to their listeners. But somehow I keep feeling that these were sidelines to the conflict of foundationalists and anti-foundationalists that was quietly bubbling, even on the bookstall.

In the afternoon, the workshops were more theme-based. Griselda Pollock and Judith Williamson set aside their papers to complain that the drift to Cultural Politics had somehow lost the politics. They did it nice and quickly, and certainly set the arguments rolling. An odd subtext ran through even quite opposed points of view (and there were plenty of those); that we need culture/art precisely to give us back our sense of hope, of utopia. Elsewhere friends tell me Richard Norman and Anne Phillips put up trenchant defences of the notion of 'equality' as part of the socialist/feminist vision. Not popular ideas just now. Meanwhile Ted Benton explored the neo-Malthusianism of certain strands of ecological thinking, while Kate Soper explored the ambiguities in Marxism's ability to think 'green'. Again, there were valuable Others I can't report on. And then there was the confrontation between Ernesto Laclau, speaking for the groundfloor demolition specialists and Peter Osborne, friend of the Frankfurt School, over whether classical Marxism had any life left in it; topped off, curiously, with Angus McDonald talking about his research into the way notions of 'democracy' were used inside the GLC. Not perhaps getting the discussion it deserved – easier to go round examining the strength of the basements.

Perhaps the most important thing about conferences like this is just the *experience of being there*. Isn't that you're persuaded to a new point of view, it's the seeing configurations emerge. In the final plenary, for example, there was Gayatri Spivak carefully distancing herself from the nigh-on relativism of Ernesto Laclau, but without of course referring to any Foundation. And there was Terry Eagleton playing pleasantly to the gallery, with a 'Well, there are good utopias and bad utopias, and marxism has the good ones'. And there, delighting me (because he spoke so much more directly than he writes) was Istvan putting the issue for me right on the line. Not a question of Foundations at all, he argued, but a *question of social agency*. Utopia without an agent is a recipe book without a cook. He spoke first. Terry, Gayatri and Ernesto discussed foundations, and I don't think referred to him once. He summed up. Finis. No meeting between the post-modernists (the majority) and the rest (whom I'm so tempted to call 'the Majority', but that's just being provocative...).

It was a good conference: well-organised, thought-provoking, a pleasure to be at. But in the main, it very determinedly set its faces against changing the world.

Martin Barker