

REVIEWS

Autonomism in Italy

Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press, 2002. Paperback, 272pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Mike Rooke

STEVE WRIGHT'S book is an important contribution to the literature on Autonomist Marxism, a current associated for many with the names of Harry Cleaver in the US and Antonio Negri in Italy. Wright's specific focus is that strand of Italian Marxism that emerged in the late '60s/early '70s around *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers' Autonomy), more loosely labelled "workerist" (*operaismo*).

He traces its origins to the post-war political stagnation of the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and PSI (Socialist Party) in the context of the restructuring of Italian capital. As workers engaged in waves of industrial militancy in the late '50s, certain dissident Marxists attempted to theorise the new conjuncture. Wright examines in detail the thought of one of the most important of these Marxists, Mario Tronti, who along with Panzieri formed the journal *Quaderni Rossi*.

The concern of this grouping was to apply Marx's critique of political economy to the new phase of capital accumulation in order to locate the source of independent working class action. From the start the aim was to study the class struggle at the point of production (the factory). This gave rise to a persistent feature of "workerism" – identifying the changing composition of the class, and the ways in which struggle by-passed the existing labour movement structures. Wright's concentration on Tronti is justified. Tronti is a seminal influence on the founding of the current. Starting from the need to restore the revolutionary content of Marx's unity of theory and practice, he rejected the view of capital as possessing an internal, autonomous logic, against which workers struggled. Labour power was rather to be viewed as the "active side of capital", determining its contradictory development. The struggle for human liberation therefore was against labour power as commodity, and the struggle against exploitation began, first and foremost, in the factory.

While there were those (Panzieri) in *Quaderni Rossi* whose aim was for a revolutionary rejuvenation of the PSI, the eventual splintering of the group produced *Classe Operaia* (Working Class) in 1963, followed by later workerist currents such as *La Classe* and *Potere Operaio*. Common to all

these groups was an emphasis on the strategic autonomy of factory based, workers struggle, from the established labour movement organisations as well as capital. PO was anti-parliamentary and against work in the traditional trade union apparatus (a modern version of the politics of the left-communist Communist Workers Party of Germany [KAPD] of the 1920s). While the orthodox Third International concept of the party was rejected by the workerist groups, there was less clarity on an appropriate alternative form. Spontaneity, and loose forms of organisation were the natural preference.

Wright gives an extremely well researched account of the debates in and around the workerist groups in this period, weaving historical detail with telling theoretical analysis. Those who were active in the revolutionary left in Britain in the late '60s/early '70s will recognise the polemical disputes described here. Among British groups like the International Socialists, Solidarity (UK followers of Castoriadis' Socialism or Barbarism group), and Big Flame, the debate mirrored the Italian debate: spontaneity, autonomous struggle and decentralisation, against centralised party direction and control. Differences which of course led to different conceptions of socialism. Indeed a criticism that can be made of the book in this respect, is that perhaps more reference could have been made of these parallel debates in France and Britain. While it is reasonable to conclude from Wright's account that much in *operaismo* derived from unique Italian conditions, a stronger connection could have been drawn between this Italian attempt to re-cast Marxism, and the left/council communist tradition around Pannekoek, Gorter, and Rühle in the 1920s, and more latterly Mattick and Castoriadis.

The energy and organisation of the "workerist" groupings gradually dissipated at the turn of the '70s. Internal debates foundered on the issues of the correct orientation to struggles and social groups beyond the factory ("wages for housework", struggles over housing, transport and welfare), the question of armed "actions" (which invited the repression of the Italian state), and the changing composition of the class. All these were set against the waning of industrial struggles, not just in Italy but across the whole of Europe. Wright identifies several weaknesses of "workerism" which could possibly account for its collapse by the early '80s: a penchant for embracing abstract categories (the "mass worker") that erased the specificity of concrete class experience, and therefore increased

the marginality of the revolutionaries; an impatience that substituted a seizing of the moment for a more patient study of class composition; a too narrow focus on the immediate point of production. While these may have played some part in its demise, much of the collapse (and subsequent marginalisation) must have been inevitable for groupings whose organisation rested so directly on the rhythms of spontaneous struggle (of industrial workers, students, women).

Wright provides a wealth of detail on the theoretical debates around the development of autonomism, including an in depth assessment of one of its most well known theorists, Antonio Negri. Overall the book is tightly argued and impressively documented. It is therefore a valuable record of the attempt to forge a communist path outside of the Bolshevik-Trotskyist tradition.

Analysing Subcultures

David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Post-modern Meaning of Style*, Berg, 2002. Paperback, 204pp, £14.99.

Reviewed by Jonathan Thorpe

DAVE MUGGLETON starts this book by telling us he was once a member of a subculture, a Punk rocker. He argues that his experience gave him a head start when he began studying sociology and saw how the various subcultures were being interpreted. He read Hebdige's classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* and thought it just wasn't talking about the experience of being a Punk rocker in a way that he recognised. So this book is a critique of Hebdige and the school he comes from. Through this critique Dave hopes to provide us with a better understanding of subcultures.

The school he is at odds with is the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies – a Marxist school, of which Stuart Hall was once director. Dave sees its approach, which tries to relate subcultures to general problems within the working class, as too all-encompassing. He cites Phil Cohen's paper 'Subcultural conflict and working-class community' (in S. Hall *et al.*, eds, *Culture, Media, Language*) as typical of the CCCS. Cohen argues that in London's East End economic changes during the post-war boom removed some of the supports of the working class in terms of community. One of the reactions to this was the development of subcultures such as Skinheads, Mods etc., which provided a solution to the problems facing these communities. According to the CCCS these subcultures represented forms of resistance to bourgeois culture, albeit in a distorted way. As Dave puts it, the CCCS "identifies the historical problematic faced by the class as a whole (and to

which the subculture is an attempted solution)".

Dave identifies a number of problems with the CCCS's approach, one being that this method involves a semiotic interpretation of subcultural solutions. Style is read as a text by the semiotician who then breaks down the code. What Dave says is missing here is that it's done from the outside looking in, and the views of members of the subcultures themselves aren't given enough attention.

He then goes on to outline an alternative, neo-Weberian approach which he says has a number of advantages over that of the CCCS. For Dave, the Weberian approach "recognises the partiality of any analysis and will derive its concepts empirically rather than from a *priori* theory". He argues that what is important are detailed studies of the actual subcultures. This involves going out and talking to members of subcultures themselves and trying to find out answers to questions such as – what do they regard as authentic or inauthentic within their own subculture?

He then proceeds to show us the empirical findings of his and other people's research into different subcultures. As a result of this research he draws two conclusions concerning the CCCS – first, that the boundaries between different subcultures are a lot more blurred, and, secondly, that each subculture is much more diverse, than we are led to believe by the CCCS. This leads on to a discussion of individualism, and he argues that what the findings tell us is that subcultures are amongst other things a quest for individual freedom in opposition to structures. Somewhat paradoxically, they are "collective expressions and celebrations of individuality". He believes that Marxist theorists have underrated the role of individuality in subcultures.

This is one area, Dave says, where the CCCS have missed a trick. His own analysis emphasises the changes during the post-war boom that occurred among the middle class, where there was a move towards the cultural industries (fashion and design) and expressive professions (teaching and lecturing). He argues that the ideas that characterise subcultures come from the middle class counter-culture and have worked their way down to the working class. So the battle is not between individualism and collectivism, but between a newer expressive culture of freedom – a bourgeois, not a working class, form of resistance – and an older puritan culture of control.

To some extent he does qualify his critique of the CCCS by stating that the Skinheads and Teds, being based more on working class traditions, do fit more closely into the CCCS class analysis, although this underlines his basic point that an empirical study has to be made of each subculture.

There is also a useful discussion of post-modernism and the author manages to keep the

book relatively jargon-free. For anyone interested in post-war Britain and the rise of youth cultures this is well worth a read.

“Zilly”: Socialist and Internationalist

Archie Potts, *Konni Zilliacus: A Life for Peace and Socialism*, Merlin, 2002. Paperback, 280pp, £14.95.

Reviewed by Dave Horsley

I FIRST came across the unusual name of Konni Zilliacus in the mid-1960s as a young student just getting involved in the Left. He was part of an honourable group of Labour MPs in the Harold Wilson '60s government who regularly denounced the US war in Vietnam. I discovered that he was then a veteran of many campaigns against aggression and for peace, dating back to the “Allied” intervention in the infant Soviet Union in 1918. Archie Potts’ book *Konni Zilliacus: A Life for Peace and Socialism* gives us the first and I believe the definitive life of this outstanding socialist.

“Zilly” was above all an internationalist and his birth in Japan in 1894 to a Swedo-Finn father and an American mother of German and Scottish ancestry made him a citizen of the world. Because of his father’s radical anti-Tsarist ideas, young Konni lived in Japan, Sweden, Finland and the USA before he finally settled in Britain. He enlisted as a medical orderly in the First World War and served by the front-line in France. He then began work as a journalist and under the influence of Norman Angell, author of *The Great Illusion*, became an early advocate of the League of Nations.

Probably the turning point of “Zilly”’s life was his involvement in 1918 in the British army in Russia which was supporting the White forces against the young revolutionary Soviet government. He denounced this reactionary policy and returned to Britain where he joined the Labour Party in 1918. After a spell at the radical *Manchester Guardian*, “Zilly” took up a full time job at the League of Nations in Geneva where he worked against the odds for progressive policies and peace for the next 18 years.

He became influential in helping form Labour Party foreign policy in the 1920s, being close to Hugh Dalton and Arthur Henderson. This dual role

at the League and advising the Labour Party made “Zilly” an expert on foreign affairs, and with the rise of fascist regimes and their aggression abroad he condemned the Japanese in China, the Italians in Abyssinia, the rise of Hitler and supported the Spanish Republic in the Civil War. Finally, disgusted by the League’s stance on these issues, he resigned in 1938 and returned to Britain, where, a year later, he was adopted as prospective Labour candidate for Gateshead.

The Second World War saw him using his immense knowledge and experience of foreign affairs and his excellent linguistic skills working for the Ministry of Information and as a member of the Home Guard. In the great Labour victory of 1945 “Zilly” was elected to parliament, but although veteran socialist George Bernard Shaw called on Clement Attlee to take heed of his knowledge and skills “Zilly” remained a back-bencher.

Konni Zilliacus’s criticism of the disastrous foreign policy in the 1940s, and his support of the Soviet Union and the recently liberated east European countries coupled with the arrival of the Cold War, had the Labour leadership gunning for him. Undeterred, he consistently stated his socialist ideas and had the backing of his constituency party and he refused to kow-tow. His problems increased when his friendship and support of Tito in Yugoslavia led to him being denounced as a capitalist agent by the Soviet government at the same time as his enemies in the Labour Party called him a Communist. In 1949, “Zilly” was expelled from the party he had served for over 30 years and when he stood as Independent Labour in the 1950 general election he was defeated.

1952 saw him readmitted to the Labour Party and three years later he became MP for Gorton. Always on the left, “Zilly” with colleagues fought to persuade the leadership to accept socialist policies. His biggest disappointments were the Wilson government’s agreement to continue with Polaris and the lack of firm opposition to the American aggression in Vietnam.

Konni Zilliacus died in July 1967 and among many heartfelt tributes the words of the veteran socialist Sydney Silverman say it all: “Zilly was in many ways the greatest international socialist of my time.” Archie Potts has done the Left a great service with his very well researched biography of this outstanding but hitherto neglected socialist and internationalist. “Zilly”’s life is an inspiration to all on the Left in these difficult times.

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