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AUSTRALO-MARXIMUS: ON SOME REACTIONS TO A NEW BRITANNIA

HUMPHREY MCQUEEN

Almost no one who has reviewed *A new Britannia* has seen what it is about.* Whatever other elements it contains it is the history of the Labor Party; this is made perfectly explicit on pp. 221-222. That this was not clear to a large body of readers can be explained by at least three things: my failure to offer sufficient guide posts; the recent popularity of anti-racism; and the abysmal level of Marxism in this country. Something needs to be said in elaboration of each of these points but the last one will occupy the bulk of this article.

The principal stylistic guide to the book's structure was inadvertently omitted. In the typed manuscript there were blank pages inserted after the chapters on "Poets", "Pianists" and "Unionists" so as to divide off the themes of nationalism and radicalism, to show "Pianists" as a bridging passage, and most importantly of all to separate the chapter on "Laborites" so that it could be seen clearly as a conclusion drawing upon all the preceding chapters. Blank pages are not shown in galley or page proofs but it was not until the first bound copies arrived that I realised the consequences of their absence. The second printing made partial amends for this by indicating the parts in italics at the top of the relevant chapters but the important initial impact was lost. Moreover I was reluctant to keep on about my basic theme because it was too much like talking down to the readers. In light of the subsequent critical response this was clearly a serious error of judgment. Probably the subtitle should have been "An argument concerning the origins and nature of the Labor Party".

Because I had not been bold enough in proclaiming my purpose reviewers searched round for something to hang a few hundred words upon. Some confessed bewilderment and spoke of a collection of essays. Many others seized upon racism and devoted their time to this. In the year of the Springbok tour and the Black Panthers this was hardly surprising but *A new Britannia* has acquired a reputation which it scarcely deserves. Racism is an important component in its argument but the book is not primarily about racism. The chapter on "Racists" is the most inept in the book. Two things contributed to this. Firstly, there was the stupid "joke" by which "base" and "superstructure" were employed as sub-headings in a presentation which was a denial of the "base-superstructure" approach. This self-indulgence destroyed any possibility of a genuine analysis.¹

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* Little or no attempt will be made to reply to particular criticisms raised by individual reviewers although individuals may be discussed in as much as they represent a widely expressed view. I have generally replied to reviewers in the journals which carried their review and a list of reviews and replies is appended to this article.

1. Some indication of the kind of analysis needed can be seen in my "Sustenance of Silence", *Meanjin Quarterly*, 30 (2), June 1971, 157-164.

Politics, Volume VII (1), May 1972, pp. 48-54

Secondly, the chapter was written on the defensive. An earlier version in *Arena* 19 had been challenged by T. G. Parsons who rejected the "racism" charge and claimed that fear of economic competition was sufficient explanation. Rightly or wrongly, I took this to be the state of conventional wisdom and talked of "pure racism" when I meant responses which could not be explained in the way Parsons suggested. It is important to remember how quickly and recently conventional wisdom on Australian racism has altered. In the light of 1972 *A new Britannia* is simply inadequate as an analysis, but it could not entirely escape from the restrictions which only its acceptance could end. But it is wrong to suppose that it is no longer necessary to prove the existence of Australian racism before proceeding to analyse it.

There has been some attempt to foist "responsibility" for racism onto the labouring classes and *A new Britannia* has undoubtedly been employed to this end. My view, which was clear as long ago as the original *Arena* article in 1969, is that the working class is not "inherently" racist. In fact, I argue that it has been the Marxian internationalists who have done more than any other group in Australia to combat racism and that they have met with some success within the working class.² In this connection I would recommend (with reservations) Robert Coles' article in *New York Review of Books*, 30 December 1972, where it is argued that to treat American hard hats as one-dimensional men is itself an instance of one-dimensional thinking. If middle-class "guilt" over racism is merely transformed into intensified anti-working class prejudice nothing will have been achieved. The roots of racism must be traced in order to end a social system which finds racism necessary and not in order to wallow in guilt or recrimination. Indeed the very notions of "guilt" and "responsibility" are indicative of the low level of debate on Australian racism.

It is now necessary to turn to an examination of Marxism in Australia in order to appreciate fully the failure of reviewers to cope with *A new Britannia's* theme. It was obviously wrong to expect many Marxists³ in Australia to be able to comprehend an attempt at theoretical history. Some reasons for the low level of Australian Marxism will be offered after a tour of some of its manifestations as expressed in reviews of *A new Britannia*.

Considering Gramsci's emphasis on the need for the history of a political party to be a monographic history of an entire society,⁴ it might have appeared reasonable to expect the local Gramsci translator, Alastair Davidson, to tumble to *A new Britannia* as a history of the ALP. That he did not equally would not have surprised anyone who had read his history of the Communist Party of Australia which is a straight organisational account. In the November-December 1971 issue of *Quadrant* Davidson vigorously defended his book from Rex Mortimer's implicitly Gramscian attack, even going so far as to claim that if he had

2. In his review Russel Ward went so far as to suggest "that the implications of this fact [radical racism] go far towards explaining why the pace of radical reform slowed down and almost ground to a halt after World War I". Like Gollan in his 1969 Fitzpatrick Lecture (*Arena* 21), Ward has confused the breakup by genuine class conflict of the old reforming consensus with the end of "radicalism".

3. Marxist is used in a very elastic way or else there would be no one to talk about. I have distinguished Marxists either by their self-categorisation or by the nature of the publication carrying their review. Even here I have allowed myself to make omissions.

4. *Selections from the Prison Notebook of Antonio Gramsci*, London 1971, 150-151.

given more space to a consideration of the social forces shaping the Communist Party of Australia he would not have been writing a political party history at all.

Before moving on to examine other aspects of Australian Marxism it will be instructive to ponder the implications of the one review which came close to recognising *A new Britannia* as a history of the ALP. In the Pabloite (Trotskyist to you) paper *International "I.R."* was full of rage:

McQueen's thesis is directed to proving that the unions were most "temperate", inept, tame-cat, anything but militant. It is important to his "interpretation" that this be shown for, unable to deny that the unions brought the Labor Party into being, he needs must show that, if those who formed the political party were backward, benighted, non-militant, then, Q.E.D., the party, too, must be backward, benighted, non-militant and therefore, not worth wasting time or thought on.

Pabloite strategy is to penetrate deeply into the ALP and thus their reviewer was understandably angry at my presentation of the ALP as irredeemably anti-working class. But the point is that he saw to the heart of *A new Britannia* because of his political commitment. The reviews as a whole provide many instances of the sociology of knowledge.

On the extreme left the absence of theoretical insight reduced critics to defending the "working class" against my scurrilous attacks. This was unnecessary because my argument about the ALP was predicated on the non-existence of a proletariat in Australia in the nineteenth century. A slightly more subtle complaint was that I had been undialectical because I had failed to stress that within the black events related there were the first stirrings of a proletariat. Two things need to be said in response. Firstly, there was a deliberate suppression of the emerging proletariat so that the forces which formed the Labor Party would be unmistakable. This suppression was made explicit in a number of places and was in no way intended to deny the existence of a proletarian stream in Australian history but merely to place its appearance around 1900, or even later. Secondly, although the book gives support to each and every individual protest from Castle Hill through Eureka to Barcadine, it recognises that the direction of these struggles was towards a non-proletarian solution. To have built support for particular struggles into a defence of their total meaning would have been empiricist, that is, anti-dialectical. For as Marx said, we cannot know fully what something is until we see what it becomes: the struggles of 1788 to 1891 became the Australian Labor Party.

The only other attempt at a dialectical critique came from Bob Gollan:

In rejecting the base-determines-superstructure model McQueen rejects not only the mechanistic marxism which had its hey-day in what passed for marxist scholarship at the height of Stalinism, but also the marxism of Marx, Lenin and Mao. He has thrown out the base entirely. Notwithstanding the introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx did not employ this model in any work of analysis as a simple cause and effect relationship. For him it was always a dialectical one in which the base affected the superstructure as well as being influenced by it. This is trite but McQueen's designation of himself as a marxist forces me to be trite.

This is not so much trite as revealing since Gollan is offering his definition of the dialectic. For him, mechanical means a one-way influence whereas dialectical means an interaction. This completely misses the point that interaction can be

either mechanical or dialectical. Gollan avoids this fundamental question because he has not yet absorbed Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach and continues to see "base" and "superstructure" as distinct *objects* and not as *sensuous human activity*.⁵ His continual counterposing of material and ideological determinants of class derives from this non-dialectical approach.

Related to this is the dissatisfaction which has been expressed at the disappearance of the "base" from my account of the ideology of labouring men in nineteenth century Australia. It is true that unlike V. G. Childe in *How Labour Governs* I do not present the "base" in the first chapter and then proceed to forget about economic considerations in detailing political events. Nor do I go to the other extreme of Ian Turner in *Industrial Labour and Politics* and attempt to link rises and falls in class consciousness with a factually dubious compilation of unemployment rates and real wages. But the "base" is there right enough in the materially uplifting experiences of "Convicts", "Diggers", "Unionists" and to a lesser extent "Selectors". The "Selectors" chapter introduces the "base" in a different form by making the developing industrial relations of production something from which labourers wished to escape. Thus it is present as an integral part of their lives and not as a reified category. More importantly still it is present in the account I give of Australia's privileged position in the British imperial systems. Of course, for those accustomed to Childe and Turner it will be somewhat more difficult to perceive.

My presentation of Australia's position within the British Empire has met with criticisms which also are grounded in the failure of many Australian Marxists to think dialectically. Too often the pre-1917 world is divided up into two watertight categories thereby leaving no room for colonial outposts. Australia was exploited by Britain and simultaneously benefited from Britain's exploitation of others so that Lenin's notion of an aristocracy of labour assumes a greater significance in the Australian case. This peculiar relationship with Britain means equally that the class structure of Australia must be seen as part of an imperial class system and not as a fully-fledged class system in its own right. Even when Australian Marxists manage to remember that Imperialism according to Lenin is something other than the exploitation of one country by another they fail to recall that he apologised for not pursuing its socio-cultural aspects; or if this is accepted, ideas have a tendency to be seen as a reflection of reality and not as a part of reality.

Ian Turner provided another example of frozen Marxism when he suggested that students at Melbourne University in the post-war years were engaged in counter-hegemonic activities. For this to have been true in Turner's case he would have needed to have attacked the scientific bases of bourgeois historiography. In fact he did the opposite in his 1949 article "History as a Science" where his only criticism of R. M. Crawford's 1946 ANZAAS lecture on precisely the same topic was that Crawford was not "scientific" enough.⁶ Turner's 1949

5. Despite my employment of the terms here I believe "base" and "superstructure" have to be jettisoned entirely. When Marx first used the expression it was as a shorthand sketch but it has gained a reality of its own so that Marxists today think of society as a split-level. The "base-superstructure" model has a past and cannot be considered apart from it.

6. Ian Turner, "History as a Science", *Science Review* (Melb.), 12, August 1949, 49-58; R. M. Crawford, "History as a Science", *Historical Studies*, 3 (11), November 1947, 153-175.

failure to appreciate the anti-Marxist nature of scientific history is understandable considering the total ideological environment of the time but for him to recall proudly these attempts in 1971 testifies to his complete failure to understand the core of Gramsci's notion of hegemony. His Marxism remains an unreconstructed, though flabbier, version of what he picked up in the forties.

Much of this criticism would not have arisen if my Marxist critics had been Marxist enough to recognise that *A new Britannia* was a history of the Labor Party. This leads on to the question of why is Australo-Marxismus? (Let me at once confess that mine is the rage of Caliban.) No more than an outline can be offered here but the failure of Australian Marxists is intimately connected with many of the motifs of *A new Britannia*. Nothing in our history has given cause for the abandonment of empiricism; in other words, our contradictions have been soluble by quantitative adjustments. By and large such Marxism as there is arrived via the Soviet Union after 1930 where it had been deguttled into scientific positivism. This coincided with the wilting of Idealism in the philosophy schools of Australian universities so that Australian marxists have never confronted a non-empiricist challenge from the Right. There has been no Hegel for a Marx, no Croce for a Gramsci. In fact, there has been very little intellectual challenge at all; when Jean Chesneaux gave a seminar at the ANU in 1970 on "How to write a short history of the world" in order to provoke his Australian audience they were too terrified to defend the fact that most of them had never considered anything larger than half a square mile over a period of six months. Also, by making the wogs learn English we have been cut off from the debate of the 1920s so that Lukacs, Korsch and Gramsci until recently were merely names. The battle for a dialectical materialism cannot be said to have begun.

Before concluding, some comments on Terry Irving and Baiba Berzins' essay "History and the New Left" are necessary because some readers have mistakenly supposed that we are in agreement. My position is most succinctly put in the essay "Laborism and Socialism" which appears in the same volume⁷ and the following paragraphs will discuss these two essays. The fundamental difference between our positions concerns the schema to be adopted for categorising the principal trends within the radical-cum-working class movements. Irving-Berzins counterpose "reformist" and "militant"; I speak of "petit-bourgeois" (Laborism) and "proletarian" (Socialism). In no sense are these merely different names for the same things.

The first and most important difference is that while my dichotomy is an attempt at class analysis, the Irving-Berzins dichotomy is a counterposing of two concepts which are not even opposites. "Militancy" is a style of action; "reformism" is a strategy. Moreover, neither are immanent in a class analysis, which is somewhat ironic when one considers that in the third paragraph of Irving-Berzins we find them criticising the merger of Brian Fitzpatrick's Marxism with W. K. Hancock's radicalism. Yet what Irving-Berzins have done is to resurrect the hoariest of Hancock's chestnuts, namely his explanation of conflicts within the labour movement as being between idealists and realists.

7. T. Irving and B. Berzins, "History and the New Left" in Richard Gordon (ed.), *The Australian New Left*, Melbourne 1970, 66-94; H. McQueen, "Laborism and Socialism", *ibid.*, 43-65.

Irving-Berzins have no trouble in finding instances of their reformist strand but they are in serious difficulties once they attempt to deal with "militancy" and it is left at the level of abstraction. We are not given one exact instance of "militancy" before 1900. Eureka is not mentioned, but this is wise, for an examination of it as a "militant" act reveals the bankruptcy of the categories Irving-Berzins have adopted: Peter Lalor was a militant—but not a radical. Indeed he was a political conservative, though no more so than that other great nineteenth century militant, John Macarthur, the only man to have led a successful armed revolt in our history. And what can they make of Jack Lang who was occasionally a militant reformist? To discuss a social group merely in terms of its *style* of action is odiously reminiscent of the most vacuous American sociology; it certainly bears little relationship to Marxism.

The culminating idealism of the Irving-Berzins thesis is never more apparent than when they explain "The militancy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [as] a reaction against the growing middle-class hegemony . . .". The depression, the strikes of the 1890s with their gaolings and shootings, and the long period of falling real wages mean nothing when two great ideas—militancy and middle class hegemony—clash in the night! The Irving-Berzins essay is proof of their thesis that the consensual tradition of nineteenth century Australia has deflected and absorbed attempts at Marxist analyses of it. Nothing in it takes us one bit closer to achieving such an analysis: it is less advanced than Campbell's two class thesis though more sophisticated in its presentation than the Hancockian distinction from which it derives.

Penguin Books have offered to produce a second edition in 1973. Rather than rewrite the book in light of my changed attitudes it seems preferable to leave it as it is but to add a lengthy post script outlining the changes which should be made. This has the virtue of presenting a continuing argument in which readers can join whilst being made fully aware of its tricks and traps. In particular the post script will contain an extended discussion of the nature of the nationalism of Imperial outposts like Australia, plus some consideration of regional loyalties as a force for Imperial patriotism whilst simultaneously undermining Australian nationalism. The handful of factual errors which remain from the long list of unsubstantiated accusations made by reviewers will also be corrected. In general my response to critics parallels that of J. B. S. Haldane who, on being asked what he thought of the objections which Catholic scientists had raised to evolution, replied that they were nowhere near as devastating as the ones he had thought of himself.

LIST OF REVIEWS

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2. Farwell, G., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January 1971.
3. Freeman, R., *Australian*, 14 November 1970.
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5. Howell, P., *Advertiser*, 19 December 1970.
6. Rivett, R., *Herald (Melb.)*, 9 December 1970; reply, 16 December 1970.
7. Rowbotham, D., *Courier Mail*, 16 January 1971; reply, 27 January 1971.

B. Weeklies

8. Cahill, R., *Tribune*, 16 December 1970; reply, 13 January 1971.
9. I.H., *Newsweekly*, 19 May 1971.

10. Irving, T., *Bulletin*, 12 December 1970; reply, 2 January 1971; response, 9 January 1971; second reply, 16 January 1971.
11. Waten, J., *Sunday Review*, 6 December 1970; reply, 13 December 1970.
- C. Student and Underground Papers
12. Barbalet, M., *On Dit*, 6 September 1971.
13. Cochrane, P., *Rabelais*, 29 June 1971; reply, 28 July 1971.
14. Curthoys, A., *Old Mole*, 26 October 1970.
15. I.R., *International*, March 1971.
16. McDougall, I., *Direct Action*, January 1971.
- D. Periodicals
17. Cain, F., *Fabian Newsletter*, 11 (1): 14-15.
18. Gollan, B., *Arena*, 24: 32-38.
19. McLachlan, N., *Meanjin Quarterly*, 29 (4): 547-553.
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21. Palmer, C., *Chauntecleer*, 4: 57-67.
22. Phillips, A. A., *Meanjin Quarterly*, 30 (1): 108-113; reply, 31 (1): 85.
23. Rowley, K., *Arena*, 24: 38-44; response from N. McLachlan, 25: 74-75.
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25. Ward, R., *Overland*, 48: 47-49; reply, 49: 22-24; response, 50.
- E. Scholarly Journals
26. Burns, A. L., *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 17 (1): 140-143.
27. McCalman, I., *ANU Historical Journal*, 7: 61-62.
28. Roe, M., *Australian Economic History Review*, 11 (2): 198-200.
29. Sinclair, K., *New Zealand Journal of History*, 5 (1): 94-97.
30. Turner, I., *Historical Studies*, 14 (56): 634-637.
31. Anon., *Political Science*, 23 (2), October 1971: 67.

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THE REVOLUTIONARY DEMOCRACY OF J. F. CAIRNS

GAY SUMMY

Analysts who talk fairly abstractly about a given social system in the real world cannot remain frozen in their ideas. Aware of societal change and of their own intellectual development, they are bound to be flexible.

J. F. Cairns¹ is no exception. Though precise formulations differ, Cairns is generally seen as basically a democratic socialist steeped in the traditional modes of ALP thought.² This paper argues that "democratic socialist" may have been the right label for Cairns before the mid-sixties. But since then his ideas have developed significantly. Cairns has never publicly proclaimed such a change.³ But he has called these new ideas "Revolutionary Democracy";⁴ a term we shall adopt.

We examine only three interrelated aspects: The first two, subject to recent change,⁵ concern Cairns' concept of socialism and its implementation in Australia. The third—unchanged—is the strong moral sense of conviction that has consistently pervaded a great deal of his political outlook and makes it

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1. J. F. Cairns, as MHR for Yarra (1955-69) and Labor (1969-), is one of the most theoretically interesting and polemical figures in Australian politics. Much of the controversy has arisen from his support for "conscience" issues which fall outside the pall of "political respectability", e.g. his sponsorship of the Australian peace movement and the 1959 and 1964 Peace Congresses; his chairmanship of the National and Victorian Moratorium Movements in 1970-71 (Cairns was one of the first parliamentarians to condemn Australian and U.S. involvement in Vietnam); his support for conscientious objectors (the government in November 1969 and October 1970 threatened Cairns with prosecution under the Crimes Act for encouraging defiance of the National Service Act), and his outspoken attitudes on civil liberties (in Melbourne, April 1969, he was arrested for distributing pamphlets in defiance of a City Council by-law).

Within the ALP Cairns has also been a leading figure. He first became a member of the Federal Parliamentary Executive in 1959 and is currently Shadow Minister for Trade. Unsuccessfully, he has contested the leadership on two occasions, once in 1967 and again in 1968 when he lost by only 6 votes.

Cairns has also been a Victorian delegate to Federal Conference and from 1964 until his resignation in March 1969 was a member of the Victorian Central Executive. As Vice-President of the Victorian branch (elected June 1969), he became entangled in the events leading up to Federal intervention and the dissolution of the Victorian branch in September 1970. Although appointed to the Advisory Council which played a vital role in the restructuring of the branch, he has, since February 1971 shown a disinclination to become involved in the intricate struggles of Victorian ALP politics. Currently he is not a member of the Victorian State Council.

Cairns is a former Nuffield scholar who studied at Oxford in 1951-2 under G. D. H. Cole. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Melbourne and before entering parliament lectured in Economic History at that university.

2. For actual descriptions compare Tom Truman, *Ideological Groups in the Australian Labor Party and their Attitudes*, Univ. of Qld. Papers, Dept. of History and Political Science, 1 (2), St. Lucia, 1965, 115-123; Louise Overacker, *Australian Parties in a Changing Society, 1945-67*, Melbourne 1968, 41; Ken Turner, "A Comment on Dr. Cairns" in Henry Mayer (ed.), *Australian Politics, A Reader*, Melbourne 1966, 248-9.

3. In an interview with the writer (27/5/70) Cairns agreed that he now attaches a wider meaning to political involvement than previously.

4. Cairns, Speech to *Secondary School Mistresses' Association*, Melbourne, July 1971.

5. "Change" is used here in a broad sense to encompass not only substantive change, but also a shift or alteration of emphasis. It is largely in this latter sense that Cairns' views may be said to have altered.

Politics, Volume VII (1), May 1972, pp. 55-66