

Poverty of Politics

Social Class In Modern Britain by Gordon Marshall *et al* (Hutchinson, £25 hbk), is part of an international study of class structure and class consciousness in a number of advanced capitalist countries. The research was designed by Erik Olin Wright to test the usefulness of structural marxist class theory, but the authors of the British study also set out to test recent theories of the British class structure, including those advanced by Eric Hobsbawm. 1770 interviews were carried out using 123 interviewees. Each interview lasted on average 77 minutes.

A short review cannot summarise the wealth of empirical detail and theoretical argument in this book, but

one point deserves highlighting. The findings of the research bear directly on many of the political debates that have been in progress on the Left in recent years about the 'retreat from class' and the 'disappearance of class'. The authors give no comfort to either camp. They can find no empirical basis for using structural marxist categories, but equally they provide no support for the idea that the working class is in decline or becoming more individualistic and less solidaristic in its consciousness. The collapse of the Labour vote, they argue, cannot be blamed on changes in the class structure; poor political organisation and leadership are the real causes. ●
Andrew Gamble

Flashes of Brilliance

Doris Lessing has been enthralling, outraging and surprising her readers since the 60s. After the magnificent *The Golden Notebook*, which became for many women a feminist inspiration, and her apocalyptic *Children Of Violence* fictions, she dismayed many by the bitter, brilliant and personally disgusted denunciation of *The Good Terrorist* and baffled even more by the pseudonymously-written Jane Somers books. Her chosen role – as the Cassandra of a world moving towards the millenium – found its clearest form in the speculative *Canopus In Argus* series: labelled 'science fiction' they are hardly novels, more sober and complex visions of the culture in which we live.

It is obvious why she adopted the genre of science fiction – a realist form cannot carry the forthright moral statements which she increasingly wishes to make – but not so obvious why, in her latest novel, she turns to the horror story. In *The Fifth Child* (Jonathan Cape, £9.95 hbk), Doris Lessing portrays a couple, Harriet and David, who are defiantly ordinary in an era (the 60s) which places a high premium on extraordinaryness, and who defiantly produce a large family in an era which preaches the virtues of childlessness and independence. Their first four children are happy and normal, and their desires for nuclear-family bliss seem fulfilled. Then Harriet becomes pregnant again, and her fifth child, Ben, tears his way into the

familial harmony. He is different – not abnormal so much as alien: a 'troll' or a 'changeling'. Through the character of Ben, Lessing can explore in stark form some of her recurring preoccupations – the nature of 'normality', the inhuman loneliness of the misfit, the traumatic effects of a dominant personality on a group. She also sets up a punitive morality, implying that Harriet and David are in some sense 'punished' for daring to be happy.

The Fifth Child is an odd and schematic novel, which spends too much of its time setting the scene. The only solid character is the alien Ben; the others are cardboard figures in the background. There are flashes of the old Lessing brilliance – the descriptions of a private mental institution have the surreal and grotesque horror of nightmare; the loneliness of the violent, malevolent and anxious Ben contain the anguished speculations into the nature of humanity that Lessing has made her hallmark. The novel is both insubstantial and yet arresting; slight but laden with questions.

Perhaps, after all, the horror story is not such a surprising form for Lessing. She has always portrayed humanity as a fragile and dubious quality, and abnormality as only a cruelly neat way of trapping people into their worlds. In *The Fifth Child* humanity is, more than ever, futile and ineffectual against the threat of difference. Herein lies its tortured power. ●
Nicci Gerrard



Untouchable Star

Great actors can become national institutions affecting fashion and ideology as well as their own profession, though they are rarely analysed as such, as if the sheer force of their performances belittles any attempt to pin them down.

Sir John Gielgud, one of Britain's leading players, is the subject of yet another hagiographical tome. Its appearance greeted his return to the West End stage after an eleven-year absence in what turned out to be an achievement of fortitude in a dulling play.

Robert Tanitch in *Gielgud* (Harrap, £14.95 hbk) provides the basic facts of Gielgud's career as actor and director, while colleagues, among them fellow national institutions like Peggy Ashcroft and Laurence Olivier, provide human remembrances alongside review clippings and that for which all such books are chiefly bought – the photographs.

Live drama releases and then loses performance whereas the camera fixes the actor in a lasting moment. Yet there is little study of how photography responds and contributes to our aesthetic judgements and, in such books as this, no sense of its defining powers. Commentary is not related to illustration and there is no acknowledgement of the designers who were responsible for the sets and costumes that give shape and context to the Gielgud the reader sees. The text is superficial, and when promising – in drawing attention, for example, to the lack of credit given to Gielgud for his championship of ensemble playing and his prefiguring of a national theatre repertoire – it fails to deliver further. The coffee table format helps make and keep the performer as alluring star – recognisable, knowable even, but ultimately and necessarily untouchable. ●
Colin Chambers

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- **Kensington & Chelsea:** Marxism Today Discussion Group meets monthly. Details from, Brian Nicholls, 42c Lancaster Road, London W11. Tel: (01) 221 7456.

EVENTS

- **Socialist Science Forum.** Prof. Steven Rose: "Can there be a Socialist biology?" Conway Hall, London WC1, Wednesday 1st June, 7.30pm. For further details ring 01-675 0893.
- **Burford, Levellers Day,** 21st May (Sat.) 10am-5pm at Warwick Hall. Speakers: Tony Benn, Linda Bellos, Michael Foot, Bruce Kent, Glynis Evans. Poets, and singer Frankie Armstrong. Tickets £4. Phone Oxford (0865) 736828 or 246270.
- **May 21st, END Day School** on 'Glasnost' and 'Perestroika' in E. Europe. Speakers include Oliver MacDonald, Jonathan Steele, and Mary Kalder. Venue: The Trophy Room, Swiss Cottage Community Centre, Winchester rd. NW3. (Swiss Cottage tube). 10.30am-5.30pm. Admission £1.50/£3.00.
- **Freedom To Roam.** National meeting for those interested in access to country, rights of way, etc. Leeds (Swathmore Institute), Sat. 4th June, 1.30 (buffet from 12 noon). Walking and climbing on Sunday. Details from Dave Priscott, 104 Acre rd., Leeds LS10 4DF. Tel. (0532) 713876. Organised by CPGB.
- **Scotland:** Annual march in honour of Scotland's Trade Union martyrs. 1820 society march assembles George Allen Park, Strathaven, at 2.15pm Saturday 15th May, thence to James Wilson's grave. All radical and progressive elements in Scottish society invited to attend. Banners welcome. Trade Union and political speakers.
- **Gordon McLennan** will speak at a public meeting at Holcott House, Yeovil College, Yeovil on Tuesday 31st May at 2.30 pm. Contact Rupert Simon on (0460) 77084 or Chriss Dennett on (0935) 850690 for details, free ticket, seat reservation and map.

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Jesse Jackson

Jesse Jackson is getting a bad press. Unfounded accusations of womanising run next to doubts about his budgeting and perennial fears of his 'unelectability'. Almost all have ignored his hard graft in the 20 years since the assassination of Martin Luther King.

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In 1974 Jesse Jackson became national president of PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). He was already writing in a way that was highly critical of a system

'Jackson is alone in offering not just hope, but a soundly-based expectation of a better life for the majority of Americans of all colours, races and creeds'

that allowed so much unemployment and inequality to exist. Writing in the most radical of American journals, *Freedomways: A Quarterly Review of the Freedom Movement*, in the spring of 1974, he said: 'When we started Operation PUSH a little over two years ago, our stated objective was to help effect and direct a transformation of the human rights movement from emphasis on civil rights to one on civil economics.'

One of the most perceptive editorial writers for *Freedomways*, JH O'Dell, wrote a decade later that 'the road to peace, justice and social progress for our nation as a member of the world community rests in the kind of mobilisation and political renaissance represented by the "Rainbow Coalition".' Yet in 1984 this coalition, intended to include all Amer-

ican underprivileged groups, had severely limited appeal.

Four years later, Jackson's emphasis on the rights of the ordinary man to a decent standard of living has finally filtered through. The most deprived of day-to-day necessities have at last realised that he is the only candidate prepared to push for economic equality. His terminology has shifted during the campaign by changing 'poor people' to 'working people'. In this way he has emerged as a focus of anti-Reaganism amongst white trade unionists and similar groups, whilst maintaining the same goals.

He also has the appeal of someone who is not part of the regular political machines. Voters from the Deep South to the industrial north have come to identify with him as a self-made politician. Indeed, Jackson has created a dilemma for mainstream political image makers. He is not only black and self-made but he is also subversive.

Few black leaders have had the opportunity to learn their political craft through holding a significant office. Only in the last couple of decades have a few, a disproportionately few, black elected officials become members of congress or mayors of large cities. In 1972 when one of the two first black mayors, Carl Stokes of Cleveland, was becoming disillusioned with his lack of power, Jesse Jackson was leaving the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its 'operation breadbasket' to found PUSH. He had come to realise that the gradualist, civil rights-oriented methods of Martin Luther King's organisation had already fulfilled their role. The time had come to fight for real economic equality. This was no denial of the King legacy since one of the last slogans King had supported was 'Power for Poor People'. It was instead a synthesis of the apparently



Carlos Guarita/Reflex

Jesse Jackson: Reviving American politics

conflicting ideas of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. King had pursued civil rights and Malcolm X had demanded economic equality. Jackson was determined to use the civil right of black and poor people to vote in order to combat economic inequality.

He is one of the few politicians to also equate economic egalitarianism with anti-sexism and seem to mean it. Whatever his faults, and however crass his hype, he is alone in offering not just hope but a soundly-based expectation of a better life for the majority of Americans of all colours, races and creeds. In Reagan's America, that is no mean achievement.

He may not represent socialism, and he may him-

self live in relative luxury, but he has raised ordinary people's expectations and consciousness and they will ultimately want those expectations met.

On the more cynical side, it is almost certain that if Jackson were ever elected he would have dramatically to curtail his egalitarian ideals. The realities of the American political system would ensure that nothing but a faint shadow remained. No president has yet fulfilled the promise of equality enshrined in the declaration of independence. Such equality seems unlikely without radical changes in the American political system and the abandonment of the American Dream. ●

Mary Ellison