

REVIEW

Alex Callinicos, *South Africa between Reform and Revolution*, Bookmarks, 1988. 231 pp. £4.95

This set of five essays, four of them reprints, contains a large amount of information, conveniently gathered together in a short (and cheap) book. Covering the events of the 1970s and 1980s, and including background information on the political history of the country, it is no mean task to set the story down in this short space. But brevity is not a sufficient reason for recommending a book, and I tended to give the book some pluses and several minuses.

The pluses are important. Callinicos is not an uncritical supporter of the ANC and UDF; does not accept the spurious call of the 'Militant Workers Tendency' that socialists work as a 'loyal opposition' inside the ANC; and does not overburden his audience with adulation of all-things that emerge from the camp of the ANC\SACP. More than this, Callinicos is correct in his assessment of the ANC (or at least part of that movement's leadership) being prepared to compromise with capital in order to edge itself closer to the seat of power. Secondly, the author does not consign the workers to the second-class position given it by the 'liberation movements'. At times Callinicos appears to place too great a political burden on the trade unions, and he is not sensitive to the controls exerted on the trade union federation by the communist party, but he does accord them the significance that they merit.

And yet, the problems in the book are all too apparent. Despite Callinicos' obvious wide reading, the many errors in the text indicate that the writer has not kept pace with new historical research, and repeats errors (both on past and current events) that should not appear in a book. Is it possible that his party friends in the Socialist Workers Party cannot point out where he is wrong in fact.?

However, it can be argued that a popular book cannot avoid these pitfalls and I am demanding too much. But if this point is granted, the many crudities in the discussion – starting with assertions that feudal relations once held in the country – through to the statement that passes were extended to women for the first time by the Nationalists, are inexcusable. Has the author not read of the remarkable resistance movement of the women of Bloemfontein in 1913?

But the most serious criticism must be directed against the call, without preparation, for the formation of a new revolutionary movement in South Africa. What programme does the author propose for such a party? How is it to build its membership? What kind of party

is being proposed? And how is that party to operate under South African conditions?

In the short space of a review it is not possible to enter into a lengthy debate with Callinicos on many of these issues. However his statement that there has been an 'intellectual maturing of South African Marxism' (for which he quotes an assorted list of authors drawn from the school of Althusser, Poulantzas, and others), makes this reviewer wonder what kind of programme Callkinicos has in mind for the revolutionary party in South Africa. If his call leads to the formation of yet another splinter group, without roots in the country, or to a further crop of casualties, with a muddled programme to boot, this appeal from Callinicos will only set the struggle back. Much more serious thinking is necessary before a Marxist party can be formed.

B. Oswin.

LETTER

From Gavin Williams, Fellow and Tutor in Politics and Sociology, Oxford.

I am flattered that my comments in a review should be singled out for attention in your opening editorial, but rather resent it being implied that I 'once believed that there was socialism in the eastern bloc, and now warn against working class leadership.' Whether the states established in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere are properly described as 'socialism' is a matter of definition. If they are not socialist, then socialism has yet to be put to the test. We need to know why alternative brands of socialism, or communism, will be different from what has hitherto been widely advertised under that label. I have never given support to the authoritarian regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Nor do I warn against working class leadership (as opposed to claims to lead the working class). In the review you cite, I observe that 'In Europe, the organisations of the working class have historically been more committed to advancing and protecting democratic rights than have the parties of the bourgeoisie – and they have generally been more concerned to advance democracy than to bring about socialism.' And I argue that 'Socialists should be concerned to articulate a conception of socialism which gives primacy to democratic procedures, choices and accountability rather than to state planning.' Would you disagree?