

**John Charlton, 2009, Don't you hear the H-Bomb's thunder? Youth and politics on Tyneside in the late 'fifties and early 'sixties. Pontypool: North East Labour History / Merlin Press. (202pp, £14.95)**

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*Don't you hear the H-Bomb's thunder?* is a lively, clearly-written account of one of the regional experiences that made up the first British New Left: direct action campaigns against nuclear weapons, the first stirrings of counter-cultural revolt, and the rise of left politics outside the framework defined by the Labour and Communist parties. A participant himself, socialist historian John Charlton carried out extensive interviews with others from the period and woven their narratives into a coherent and always interesting study of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.

If their mostly working-class parents' worlds had been massively shaped by poverty, world wars and family trauma, in an English Northeast defined above all around heavy industry, their children - young adults around the year 1960 - grew up in a world marked by definite material improvements on the ground, but overshadowed by Cold War, institutionalised racism in South Africa and the USA, and a deeply conservative culture. Charlton's chapters organise these experiences: moments of coming to political awareness, the defining moment of the struggle against nuclear weapons, the encounter with youth music and culture, the formation of a Labour youth group which - as elsewhere - rapidly escaped the party's control, and the radicalisation towards Trotskyist politics.

Some classic studies have been carried out in this mode, such as Fraser's (1988) oral history of 1968 in multiple countries, or Hamon and Rotman's (1987) account of the French New Left from opposition to the Algerian war through to the movements of the 1970s. As the first New Left ceases to cast such a powerful shadow on the British intellectual left (or as that formation disaggregates in different directions), studies of phenomena such as *New Left Review* are coming into their own.

What "early New Left" figures such as EP Thompson or Raymond Williams would no doubt have stressed is that such formative moments are not only metropolitan, and cannot be fully understood through accounts of leading intellectuals, key organisations, or indeed celebrities. "The regions" are often (not always) recipients of events elsewhere (so too indeed are whole countries, as the struggles of the period against nuclear war, apartheid, segregation or the Vietnam War suggest). But they are *actively* so; their response, or lack of it, is often determining for the overall development of a movement.

One disappointment for me was that this book did not bring this point out more; it shows very effectively how participants' political careers were shaped by history and social context, but rather less how they, and the larger movements they were part of, went on to affect that context - or rather, given the methodological constraints of an oral history, how participants understood the long-term effects of their politics then and subsequently. In one sense, perhaps, Charlton does offer a sober assessment of the quantitative significance of this group, which was strong enough to be part of unseating the dominance of the old, Labour / Communist left and to put new issues and forms of organising on the agenda, but far smaller numerically than participation levels later in the decade, which then shaped subsequent developments more powerfully. "Early risers", perhaps, have the joy of "bliss it was in that dawn to be alive", but are unlikely to be able to determine what

happens next.

In Charlton's account, class, gender and ethnicity are all shown as structuring people's experience and lives, most powerfully in the chapter on what their parents' lives had been like. He shows how important it is to *situate* movements vis-à-vis a region's economic situation and its political structures (which, as Vester et al. 1993 show, explain much of the different character of post-1960s movement milieux). As he observes, most of his characters show substantial continuity vis-à-vis their parents; there are differences and fallings-out, but relatively little of the rebellion often held by conservatives to underlying youthful radicalism. Similarly, as he can now observe fifty years on, most surviving participants have worked in areas linked to human needs and have maintained a general orientation towards progressive politics, whatever their specific choices and levels of activity.

The socio-politically aware oral history traditions of the European left (Thompson and Burchardt 1982, Portelli 1999) have much to offer us. They can give a sense of how we as individual human beings "do" movement participation - which is no doubt often more easily accessible to us in retrospect and collectively than to individuals at the time, particularly when those individuals are trying to grasp their situation, making far-reaching choices under pressure, growing into adulthood, and on occasion making history.

They show how personal pathways through campaigns, organisations and subcultures work - pathways which in turn construct those collective situations in practice, but which a top-down analysis often misses. They also show the crucial role of cultural milieux and friendship groups: these pathways may be personal, but they are shared ones, even as milieux and groups are broken and new ones made under the pressure of choice and struggle. As we live our own struggles, humanising them - without reducing them to individual biography - is important both to creating "movements with a human face" and to offering alternatives worth living to other people.

The rich texture and practical focus of Charlton's book make it a pleasure to read. As a source of insights, stories and facts, it will continue to affect many readers long after they put the book down. As we labour under the threat of new kinds of massive, system-induced destruction - in some ways eminently comparable to those of nuclear war was in the years leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis - it can, perhaps, also be helpful to remember that we have faced this situation before, fought against it, and - arguably - won.

## References

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## About the reviewer

Coming to political activism in the second anti-nuclear weapons movement of the 1980s, Laurence Cox's 1999 doctoral research looked at the counter-cultural milieux underlying social movement activism. He has been involved in two oral

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