

REVIEWS

Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1993).

This is a difficult book to review, because its substance consists so much in the detail of the account — in the many particular narratives that compose the New Left's history between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s, in the intellectual biographies of its leading personalities, in the detailed exposition of the key debates and themes, and so on. Moreover, the story has been told before, in whole or in its parts, though usually via the continuing polemics of the New Left itself: either as autobiography (in the various essays of Edward Thompson and his partisans, or in the rejoinders of Perry Anderson), or as other kinds of retrospective (e.g. Julia Swindells and Lisa Jardine, *What's Left? Women in Culture and the Labour Movement* (1990), or Robin Archer, et al (eds.), *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On* (1989)). Consequently, there is little startlingly new or distinctive in what Lin Chun's book has to say, although it manages to bring a valuable range of materials and discussions together.

As Chun points out, there were actually three distinct strands, each generationally driven, in the New Left's formation: a dissenting Communism that crystallized from the great crisis of 1956 in its British version, borne basically by the generation of anti-fascists politicized by the 1930s and 1940s; the independent socialism of a younger generation

formed during the Cold War in the 1950s; and the intellectual radicalism of 1968, strongly oriented towards European Marxism and drawn more to theoretical innovation than the sustaining of popular radical traditions. The first two of these cooperated reasonably well in the first phase of the New Left's history, between 1957 and 1962, while during the 1960s the emergence of the third current was more contentious. Then in the 1970s the drive for "theoretical construction" generated impressive new left-wing subcultures in the academic and professional intellectual worlds, at the expense of seriously alienating the earliest of these generations mentioned above. Chun argues that the later history of the British Left, in the period dominated by Labour's ineffectuality and Thatcherism's self-confidence, was shaped by a new set of forces and concerns surrounding the rise of new social movements. Accordingly, the book ends in 1977.

It is organized into four parts. The first, relatively brief ("The Making of the New Left") deals with origins, leading up to the merger of *The New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review* in *New Left Review (NLR)* in 1960. The second ("Traditions and Culture, 1957-1962") explores the main themes of the early years, from the invoking of British radical traditions and the elaboration of socialist humanism, to the focus on working-class culture, and the opening of a discussion of the nature of revolution. The third section focuses on the New Left analysis of contemporary British society in the 1960s ("Society and

Politics, 1963-1969,"), divided roughly equally between Edward Thompson's historicized account of "English peculiarities," the younger generation's reading of contemporary capitalist change, and the emergence of a new Marxist intelligentsia. The final and longest section ("History and Theory, 1970-1977") deals with the post-1968 fragmentation, tracking the latter through a series of thematic or disciplinary areas, beginning with the general engagement with Western Marxism, continuing through a series of particular theoretical debates, and ending with the emergence of a new feminism.

One wonders about the balance of this account which is so heavily weighted towards the last of the four phases, the period of diffusion but simultaneous dispersal. It's not that Chun's survey of New Left intellectual influences in the 1970s is too detailed or wrong in itself. The project which Perry Anderson and the new editorial group of *NLR* set themselves, of making British left culture less parochial and more theoretical, of bringing British left intellectuals into the transnational conversation of social and cultural theory, of internationalizing the British Left beyond the established boundaries of anticolonial solidarity in the empire — of making a British left intelligentsia for the first time on the continental European model, in fact — has brilliantly succeeded, although, of course, the conditions of this success were far bigger than *NLR*'s efforts alone. But Chun's account remains attenuated in important respects. The publishing program of New Left Books/Verso, which in its early years amounted to the systematic bringing into English of European Marxisms, might have received more sustained consideration, as might the detailed contents over time

of *NLR* itself, and it's worth mentioning that the new theory discourse embraced non-Marxist traditions (including Weber and the French *Annales*) as well. Likewise, the wider arena of this activity — such as the Penguin Marx Library, and other aspects of Penguin's publishing program in the late 1960s and early 1970s, or the short-lived but imaginative bid for a wider audience through the magazine *Seven Days* — is underplayed. But overall this aspect of the New Left's history is captured quite well.

More seriously, Chun understates the fullness of left-intellectual innovation in the 1970s, barely mentioning journals like *Screen*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Capital and Class*, or *Economy and Society*, and missing others like *Radical Science Journal*, *Ideology and Consciousness*, and *m/f* altogether. The latter omission is especially important, and reflects the inattention to feminism in the author's framework, where it appears as a kind of afterthought, at the very end of the book, in a mere five-page discussion of Juliet Mitchell's *Women's Estate* (1971). As Chun rightly observes, the early New Left kept "a near silence in its writings on questions of gender identity, the family, sexuality, domestic labour and the relationship between these and politics." (167) But there is no point in simply repeating the neglect, by displacing the issues into some future context of discussion, allegedly beyond the book's legitimate scope. In fact, the 1970s were a period of vital feminist activity in the intellectual terms prioritized in Chun's approach, both in the challenging of the existing Left and in the creation of a separate feminist arena, which eventually resulted in journals, centres, and organized discussion. This activity became realized far more in the 1980s, it's true, but the key departures were occurring

much earlier, and at all events well within Chun's period of "theoretical construction" in the 1970s. For instance, the first edition of Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, which contains an excellent critical account of precisely this ground from a feminist point of view, appeared in 1980. Some adequate attention to the emergence of feminism would have alleviated the effect of two additional neglects in the book, namely, of the institutional growth of cultural studies, and of the theoretical importance of post-structuralism (which according to Chun "never had [much of] an impact," 160). In both cases, possibilities were being assembled in the 1970s which owed much to the New Left's longstanding preoccupations, but which came to fruition beyond the New Left's own original intent. To bracket this history of silence, conflict, and transcendence from the account makes no sense, and Swindell and Jardine's important critique (not mentioned in Chun's copious bibliography) shows how centrally this process needs to be reported.

This reflects a deeper problem with Chun's account, namely, its divorce from the social and political histories of the period. The big higher education expansion of the 1960s (both the founding of new universities and — equally important — the creation of the polytechnics) provides the necessary context for the post-1968 phase of the story, because the intellectual history is not separable from the creation of an intelligentsia in this sociological and professionalized sense. There is a more extensive story of the 1970s to be constructed here — around particular institutional sites (the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and certain departments of the Open University would be two of

the most important) — around the creation of left caucuses and journals within professional as well as academic disciplinary milieus (e.g. journals like *Radical Education*, *Hard Cheese*, *Humpty Dumpty*, *Case-Con*, and so on), among teachers, psychologists, and social workers, activity in the arts, and general improvisation within a public sphere (from local initiatives like Centreprise and the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, to other community-based cultural movements like the Association of Community Theatres, magazines like *The Leveller*, and a variety of footholds in the media). All of this activity was no less influenced by the New Left histories related by Chun than, say, *History Workshop Journal* and its associated movement, which she does decide to treat. Again, this growth was facilitated by the earlier moments of New Left innovation; many of the activists were formed biographically in the latter; and many of the salient issues were continuous with those raised earlier on. Taking 1977 as Chun's preferred terminus, for instance, we might look at the right-wing Gould Report issued in that year, which painted a garish picture of left-wing subversion of the educational system, and whose publication coincided with a conference on left intellectual work at the Birmingham Centre, drawn from the full repertoire of new journals alluded to in this paragraph. In other words, there was actually an intense, even febrile, level of activity in these broader contexts of left intellectual work, and none of this figures in Chun's account.

Some of these broader continuities might have emerged if the first two parts of the book had been less narrowly constructed around the leading figures of Edward Thompson, Raymond Williams,

and others. In fact, the early contents of *NLR* and its two predecessors were very widely cast in cultural terms, focusing to a great extent on aspects of youth culture and the changing terms of social understanding in the postwar present, with significant participation from public intellectuals in the arts. Even as *NLR* acquired its heavier theoretical tones in the later 1960s, attention to film, rock music, literature, avant-garde theory, and so on remained a key part of the contents. Thus a much different account of the New Left could be written, which stressed this wider domain of cultural politics, embracing television (e.g. Dennis Potter, Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, the Wednesday Play), theatre and agitprop (e.g. Albert Hunt's Bradford College of Art Theatre Group, John McGrath's 7:84 Theatre Company, Gay Sweatshop, Monstrous Regiment), film (from Free Cinema and the so-called new wave of the early 1960s, through the pioneering theory and practice of people like Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, to the *Screen* debates of the 1970s), art (from the situationists and the art school radicalism of the early years, through the events at Hornsey and the wider realm of the counterculture, to the definition of new art history and art theory in the course of the 1970s), and so on.

This would connect to Chun's discussions of culture in the book's second part ("Cultural Traditions and the Working Class") but would overcome the powerful implication of its long fourth part, which shows the New Left diversifying into ever more elaborate forms of academic theoretical work and losing its connection to popular culture and social life. More recent areas of left intellectual work, which are somewhat under-described by Chun, such as cultural studies, would then appear in a longer conti-

nunity, for which texts like Stuart Hall's and Paddy Whannel's *The Popular Arts* (1964) and Denys Thompson (ed.), *Discrimination and Popular Culture* (1964) become the key. This is not the least of the ways in which Chun's skimpy first chapters needed to be filled out, for the slow build-up of cultural rebellion between the Bill Haley tour of 1956 and the big bang of the 'sixties was just as necessary to the conditions of the New Left's emergence as were the political passage from Suez and the Soviet invasion of Hungary to the events of 1968. As Laura Mulvey (who, like Peter Wollen, goes unmentioned in Chun's text) says, this was the vital combination, "a mixture of high French intellectual culture and low American popular culture," in which the latter was "epitomized by Hollywood cinema, preferably B movies, also of course American popular music — jazz and particularly rock-'n'-roll." When Mulvey's generation "turned against the values of British culture, also against British political traditions, British socialism — the values of Leavis to put it in a nutshell," they did so not only with the aid of French theory, but also with the immensely pleasurable resources of rock-and-roll and other aspects of "mass culture" dismissed or stigmatized by the older New Left generation (Jonathan Green, *Days in the Life. Voices from the English Underground 1961-71*, 1988, 11).

The unwillingness of this book to engage with popular culture — to see the New Left through these larger social and cultural histories rather than just as an episode in the history of ideas — is ultimately its biggest weakness. It dichotomizes the possibilities for the New Left's overall vision between, on the one hand, celebrating indigenous radical traditions and what Chun calls

“the root values of the native ethos — clarity, logical rigour, soberness, scepticism, and distrust of any dogmatic ideology,” (191) a loaded catalogue, if ever there was one; and on the other hand, the turn to theory. But perhaps there was a third form of engagement, which neither repudiated the real strengths of the working-class and radical traditions affirmed by Thompson and Williams, nor side-stepped the challenge of theory, but which was simultaneously product and critique of the popular entertainment cultures that were actually transforming the modalities of social and political life in the late twentieth-century British present.

Taking such a view is bound to affect one’s sense of the New Left’s success or failure. In this respect, Chun’s perspective is somewhat unclear and contradictory. On the one hand, she makes a very strong claim for success: “To discuss the legacy of the British New Left is to discover what far-reaching changes it brought about, if not institutionally then in terms of lifestyle, moral attitude, intellectual thinking, and political culture.” (xvii) But, on the other hand, she constantly counterposes the aspirations of the New Left to “reality,” contrasting its “culture” with “the common-sense morality of Labour and popular will under the conditions of welfare social democracy,” and disputing its real effects: “It is undeniable that the British New Left never grew beyond being an intellectual opposition and indeed failed to become a major interventionist social force of any significance in actual political struggles.” (xiv) But this sets the stakes too high. If we define success in more carefully specified and less global terms, there are all sorts of ways in which the New Left moment registers its long-term and continuing effects, an argument

that may be illustrated most conveniently via biography. I will present only three brief examples: Stephen Yeo, a leading social historian associated with History Workshop, deeply involved in community activism in Brighton (e.g. through the community publishing group QueenSpark), with a New Left pedigree in CND and the *May Day Manifesto*, now recently appointed as head of Ruskin College; Kim Howells, also a social historian, from a working-class Communist background in the South Wales coalfield, student at Hornsey in 1968, immersed in the counterculture, education officer for the South Wales miners in the early 1980s, now a Labour MP; and Hilary Wainwright, student activist in 1968, practical advocate of industrial democracy in the 1970s, co-founder of the Popular Planning Unit of the GLC from 1982-86, co-author with Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal of *Beyond the Fragments* in 1979 (another classic — and feminist — product of the 1970s undiscussed by Chun), and tireless agitator for popular democracy (most recently in *Arguments for a New Left* (1994) and as prime mover of the new journal *Red Pepper*), moving amphibiously between activist and academic worlds. None of these biographies matches the straightforwardly academic intellectual category instated by Chun’s account; they are each still around in positions of significant institutional or political influence, certainly within a public sphere; and they may each be replicated many more times.

In sum, this book provides a reliable, but partial, intellectual history of the British New Left up to 1977. It provides helpful summaries of many key debates, such as the works of Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams, or Tom Nairn’s writings on nationalism, or Perry

Anderson's critique of British intellectual culture, and so on. But it foreshortens the treatment of the 1970s departures (the largest portion of the book) very misleadingly, whether in the perfunctory and question-begging treatment of feminism, or in other ways. It also removes the New Left's intellectual history from its wider contexts even of intellectual-political work, producing a gratuitously "elitist" picture of its efficacy and interests. But the New Left, as I've argued, was always connected to broader goals and constituencies. It always had a relationship to popular culture, and the post-1956 generations (i.e. *not* the dissident Communists) have the distinction of validating mass culture as a necessary site of politics. Anyone politicized between the mid-1950s and the later 1970s had to be moved by the relationship of politics and pleasure, one might also say, and this is ultimately the biggest blindspot of this book. To write the history of the New Left without sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll is a peculiarly funless trip.

Geoff Eley
University of Michigan

Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1994).

Vietnam remains too close. It is not just that students of the war have as yet only touched on the largest issues — why escalation, why defeat — it is also that so many of them remain uncertain as to what is important and what trivial. In the hands of its historians, the Vietnam War continues to be fought through an accu-

mulation of details and anecdotes in the service of the obvious. As Norman Graebner commented glumly, "the new scholarship has corrected the record on matters of fact, but to the extent that much of it has failed to examine the war's political and intellectual context it runs the risk of burying whatever lessons the war has to offer." The need then exists for a major reinterpretation of the war's history, and in particular of support for, and opposition to, American involvement. Given that *The War Within* is one of the first comprehensive treatments of the anti-war movement by someone too young to have joined it, it is not therefore unreasonable to approach the book with raised expectations. Unfortunately, the work disappoints. Yes, it offers a massively detailed chronology, packed with information, heavy with acronyms, overwhelming in its attention to actions and emotions. But Wells, like so many Vietnam historians, cannot resist the temptation to display his subject as one might arrange sea shells: lovingly — turning them now and then to catch the light, scrutinizing them for any weakness or blemish. Shimmering relics, but used for what purpose?

Wells' basic argument is relatively commonplace: the anti-war movement constrained U.S. policymakers and eventually helped force a withdrawal, but the peace activists remained uncertain of their strength. To express this central irony, Wells counterpoints the actions of politicians and protesters and pairs the twice-told recollections of the activists with the electroplated memories of the government officials. It is not, however, a juxtaposing that produces any subtleties of insight: Wells' policymakers are duplicitous autocrats who refused for too long to acknowledge publicly the constraints they privately experienced.