

REVIEWS

Why Did the USSR Collapse?

Roger Keeran and Thomas Kenny, *Socialism Betrayed: Behind the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, International Publishers, 2004. Paperback, 230pp, £14.

Reviewed by Mike Rooke

THE THESIS of this book is summed up by the comment made by Fidel Castro in 1992 on the collapse of the Soviet Union, and quoted approvingly by the authors: "Socialism did not die from natural causes: it was a suicide." The authors, two academics aligned politically with the Communist Party of the USA, have assembled a detailed case against the "petty bourgeois tendency" represented by Gorbachev. They argue that it was the Gorbachev reforms, begun in 1986, that started the process of economic and national disintegration of the Soviet Union. The essence of Gorbachevism was that it favoured compromises with capitalism (the market), a tendency whose genealogy goes back to Bukharin and Krushchev. This is contrasted to the "left wing tendency" of Lenin and Stalin which was characterised by the promotion of class struggle in the interests of the working class. The Gorbachev programme reflected the interests of those with a stake in private enterprise and the market (would-be entrepreneurs and corrupted CPSU officials). These representatives of the "2nd economy" were expanding in number and influence after 1953, a trend further strengthened by the burgeoning of an educated urban intelligentsia in the '70s and '80s. The final years of Perestroika (1989-91) directly reflected the interests of these elements.

There is certainly some truth in the claim that Gorbachev expressed the interests of those who wished for a return of the market and private enterprise. In which case the authors would really have had to explain just why such restorationist impulses were gaining strength in Soviet society. Trotsky in his 1936 book *Revolution Betrayed* predicted that it was precisely the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union inaugurated by the Stalinist bureaucracy that would prepare the ground for capitalist restoration. By contrast, what the authors argue is that although Soviet socialism had problems (they argue "democracy" was continually being developed), it "embodied the essence of socialism as defined by Marx". The pro-market intelligentsia and proto-entrepreneurs supporting glasnost and perestroika were in fact a product of

the very success of socialism, in which case their politics cannot be understood as anything other than an irrationalism. This crude apologetics is of course entirely in line with the thinking of the Stalinist caste that dominated the Soviet Union for 70 years.

For many revolutionary Marxists the Soviet Union after the early '20s (and for some beginning in 1917) was a bureaucratic command economy that rested on the systematic atomisation of its population at all levels. Moreover, rather than a system of state supervised economic planning, what in fact did exist was a level of disintegration and corruption that was only held in place by terror and repression. When this dictatorship was relaxed, the whole edifice began to unravel. The question of the Soviet Union has understandably pre-occupied Marxists for the whole of the twentieth century. Identifying its class nature – bureaucratic collectivist; degenerated/deformed workers' state; state capitalism – remains of critical importance, since on the diagnosis hangs the very notion of what socialism is and how it is to be achieved. This book contributes absolutely nothing to that ongoing critical debate.

These unreconstructed Stalinists, whose criticism of the CPUSA is that it underestimated the likelihood of socialist collapse during the Gorbachev period, have unashamedly written a book that lends academic respectability to the mythology of the Stalinist version of socialism (i.e. which for this reviewer represents the very antithesis of socialism). Theoretically it possesses little that is worthy of serious attention, and in parts descends to the level of the old official CPSU prop-aganda texts. But the book, advertised prominently in the *Morning Star*, carries a message to a new generation of militants and activists who may read it, that the monstrous experience of Stalinism was somehow in the interests of the workers whose blood and sweat sustained it. For that reason alone it has to be taken seriously and its arguments criticised.

US Imperialism in Latin America

Clara Nieto, *Masters of War: Latin America and United States Aggression from the Cuban Revolution Through the Clinton Years*, Seven Stories, 2003. Paperback, 622pp, £25.

Reviewed by Will Podmore

IN THIS excellent history of Latin America since 1959, the Colombian diplomat Clara Nieto surveys

the continent country by country, showing how the US state has consistently intervened in their internal affairs.

The alliance of neo-liberalism and social democracy internally, the USA and the EU externally, has kept capitalism in power in Latin America. So half its people live in worsening poverty, a third are unemployed, and foreign debt totals \$400 billion.

Nieto focuses on the Cuban revolution and its effects. In March 1959, President Eisenhower ordered CIA sabotage and terrorism against Cuba. Kennedy was worse. Nieto writes: "His policies opposing the Revolution were more aggressive than Eisenhower's." Two days before the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, US planes bombed Cuba's cities, under Kennedy's orders. Kennedy started the US policy of counter-insurgency in Latin America (and Africa and Asia), supporting death squads and military dictatorships. Nieto shows how the US state sponsored counter-revolutionary wars in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Guatemala and Chile.

Johnson carried on Kennedy's policies: he backed the generals' fascist coup in Brazil in 1964, and attacked the Dominican Republic in 1965. Nieto depicts Reagan's wars – occupying Honduras, arming the death squads of El Salvador, running the Contras' terrorist war against Nicaragua, attacking Grenada – and Bush's attack on Panama.

The US state has never ceased its illegal, terrorist attacks on Cuba. The *New York Times* reported in 1983 how the head of a Miami-based anti-Cuban terrorist group admitted in a US court that he had taken germs to Cuba in 1980, proving Cuba's accusations of CIA biological warfare against Cuba. The US state made Armando Valladares – a former Batista police officer and convicted terrorist – ambassador and president of its delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission.

But the Commission's 1989 report refuted all the US slanders about Cuba's torture and abuse of political prisoners. The world knows now who tortures and abuses political prisoners detained without charge or trial.

Nieto's final chapter examines how Cuba has survived and kept its revolution going. The key is that its people, determined to defend their democracy, independence and sovereignty, actively prevent the counter-revolution from organising.

Good, Evil and George Dubya

Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil: Taking George W. Bush Seriously*, Granta, 2004. Paperback, 256pp, £8.99.

Reviewed by Catherine Lafferty

GEORGE W Bush is the most controversial world leader of our times, notorious for stealing the electoral laurels of 2000, invading Iraq and

mispronouncing English words.

Peter Singer is Ira W DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton. He is credited with having inspired the animal rights movement with the seminal text, *Animal Liberation*. He is no stranger to controversy: his Princeton appointment was greeted with protests by disabled rights activists because of his justification for the killing of disabled children up to 28 days after birth.

In *The President of Good and Evil* one controversialist examines the record of another on his own terms. Singer notes that Bush is prone to couching his political arguments in explicitly moral terms and sets out to assess his ethical record, taking in such diverse policies as taxation, bioethics and war. He says he wants to take Bush seriously.

He starts in a good place: Bush's rhetoric, which is studded with references to good, evil, morals, right and wrong. A lot of this sounds embarrassing to a non-American audience and Singer, an Australian, frankly admits that Bush's distinctively American moral outlook sounds weird to the ears of sophisticates and cynics alike.

Bush, in common with other conservative leaders since Thatcher, claims a moral case for cutting taxes. Where there are budgetary surpluses, the money should be remitted back to taxpayers in the form of tax cuts. Or as Bush told a Tax Family event in February 2001: "It's your money". Singer juxtaposes Bush's tax-cutting agenda with his stated aim of building a single nation of justice and opportunity. He asks rhetorically, if the money really is "your money" and should be given back to the people, where will the money needed to fight poverty and achieve justice come from?

But the polemic bursts into life when Singer dissects the claim that budgetary surpluses are "your money". He demonstrates the fallaciousness of this claim with admirable precision and economy of prose. In a complex modern society, he explains, it would be impossible to establish property rights with government and without taxes.

Singer then turns his attention to another area of Bush's ethical/political record, Bush's stated aim to build a "culture of life" in America. Given that Singer is possibly the world's most controversial bioethicist, this should be one of the book's highlights.

Bush maintains that human life is sacred from the moment of conception until death. Many people agree with him, but Bush is in a unique position in being able to effect legislation that recognises the dignity of embryos and foeti.

First to be tackled by both Bush and Singer was the use of embryonic stem cells for medical research. Subjected to fierce lobbying by both pro and anti sides, Bush sidestepped the furore by denying federal money to embryonic stem cell research. He also delivered what was widely acknowledged to be one of the most thoughtful speeches of his presidency on the topic.

Singer takes aim at Bush's decision to withhold money – a ban on research in all but name, he asserts – and rubbishes the ethical framework for his position. Along the way he rehearses the specious arguments for embryonic stem cell research. Embryonic stem cells *could* pave the way for curing a range of diseases. They *could*, but is a possibility enough to justify human cloning? Embryos may be human life (he doesn't quibble that point) but have no intrinsic worth precluding their use in research. If they have no intrinsic worth, the pain of women who've suffered miscarriages is irrational – the mere ravings of hormonal females. And they may be human but so what? Why is human life considered more special than, say, chimpanzee life, he wonders, banging on his favourite ethical drum. Well because it is, the rationalist answers – because I care more for humans than I do for chimps and so do you, dear reader and so, ultimately, does Singer.

The debate on embryonic stem cells should provoke some genuinely incisive thinking from Singer. How valid are the excitable claims made about embryonic stem cells? How much are they influenced by the financial interests of the biotechnology sector? What does the desperate hype of cloning enthusiasts tell us about science in an age of scepticism?

The fact is that embryonic stem cell research does not hold out the only hope for understanding and curing diseases. Indeed a cursory glance at the scientific literature shows that it's the dull, plodding work using ethically uncontroversial adult stem cells that are making significant strides in our understanding of and battle against disease.

After this unpromising start, the mistakes come thick and fast and Singer's thinking becomes positively sluggish.

Bush reinstated the Mexico City Policy, first implemented by Reagan, which denies aid funding to groups that perform or promote abortions. Singer attributes this Bush's pro-life convictions. But you don't have to be a signed up member of SPUC to find something absurd and deeply sinister about governments using aid budgets as a cloak for anti-natalist projects in the southern hemisphere, particularly given the historic overlap between sections of the birth-control and eugenics movements.

He defunded the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for similar reasons, Singer claims. Wrong. UNFPA was defunded when the State Department found the agency complicit in massive human rights violations in China. This mistake would be understandable if made by an inexperienced hack but is simply inexcusable when made by an Ivy League academic of international renown.

Its difficult to take this book seriously having read the pages dealing with bioethics, supposedly Singer's specialist subject. He criticises Bush's

support for the death penalty but this is hardly controversial stuff to a European audience and adds nothing to the voluminous literature on the topic. He moans about Bush stymieing Oregon's law on physician assisted suicide because he thinks individuals, with no prospect of recovery should be able to take death in their own hands. How he squares this fatalistic pessimism about terminal illness with his irrational faith in the possibilities of embryonic stem cell research is not explained.

He is more generous when looking at Bush's record on AIDS and admits that shortsighted development polices of previous administrations has been reversed with the investment of significant funding to fighting the disease.

A chapter is devoted to Bush's fusion of faith and politics, taking in the controversial decision to allow federal funding for faith-based charities. Singer crackles briefly into life again, applying dispassionate rigour and cutting through the hysteria this measure has provoked. But it's a short respite and is followed by a protracted sneer at Bush's folksy evangelical theology.

Singer rightly devotes an enormous chunk of the book to examining the record of Bush at war. He starts with Afghanistan and using the example of Hungary in 1956 demonstrates that the cost of war in terms of civilian casualties was disproportionate to the stated goal of securing a Taliban-free country. The Afghan war was ethically unjustifiable he maintains.

He is unsparing in his criticism of Bush's invasion of Iraq and what he terms of the "Bush doctrine" of pre-emptive actions against adversaries. He succinctly argues that when this is combined with the Defense Department's view of the enduring interests the US must defend, the distinction between offense and defense becomes "hopelessly blurred".

So is Bush's ethic Christian? Selectively so, concludes Singer. Bush seems to have ignored Jesus Christ's words about turning the other cheek and the Pauline teaching of repaying good for evil. Most Christian leaders, including the Pope, emphatically opposed the Iraq war. When the leaders of the National Council of Churches and his own denomination, the United Methodists, asked for an opportunity to present their objections to the war, Bush refused to meet them. In fact, the characteristic Bush demagoguery about good and evil owes more to Manichaeian ideas about cosmic clashes of good and evil, than orthodox Christianity.

This is a diverting read, if not a particularly original one – surely no one is surprised to find that an American president's ethical pronouncements fall down when subjected to critical scrutiny. It is also marred by some sloppy passages and at least one hair-raising factual error. After 2 November 2004, Singer at least has the opportunity to write an updated and revised edition.

To Clone or Not to Clone?

Glenn McGee and Arthur Caplan (eds), *The Human Cloning Debate*, Berkeley Hills Books, 2004. Paperback, 330pp, £11.99.

Reviewed by Will Podmore

THIS IS a thought-provoking collection of essays by 25 contributors, pro and anti cloning, scientists, doctors, academics, researchers, journalists and the odd US President.

The most mind-changing essay for this reviewer was Ronald Bailey's 'Cloning babies is not inherently immoral'. Throughout history, some have violently opposed scientific developments. For example, *Guardian* columnist Jeremy Rifkin described biotechnology as "a form of annihilation every bit as deadly as nuclear holocaust, and even more profound". This dispute between science and anti-science, progress and reaction, the materialist and idealist philosophies, can never be resolved. It is a fundamental philosophic divide that cannot be bridged. One or other must prevail.

The argument that we must wait for a consensus to emerge is reactionary, for this would mean waiting forever. No amount of additional debate can ever win round the opposition to progress, because that opposition is entrenched behind ramparts of dogma; faith-based, it is impervious to evidence and reason.

Presidential calls for a moratorium are prevarication. Similarly, the search for absolute safety, like all searches for absolutes, is a delusion, which makes the precautionary principle another recipe for stasis.

Some who oppose cloning opposed In Vitro Fertilisation earlier. Possibly one million babies have been born through IVF since 1978. This safe and beneficial procedure arose from decades of refining techniques in a variety of animals. Safe cloning will similarly result from animal research: a ban on research would prevent work into making cloning safe.

In Germany the government has banned all research work on embryos, so Germany makes no contribution and has no influence on this matter. Britain's parliament passed a law that regulates therapeutic cloning, but unfortunately bans all efforts at reproductive cloning.

Fear of biotechnology has done great harm, because technological stagnation poses greater risks than technological innovation. Banning stem cell research or research into reproductive cloning would prevent many promising developments in medical research; it could drive research to countries less equipped to balance safety with development. The biotechnology revolution has already brought enormous benefits, IVF for instance, and will bring many more, but only if we encourage and support research into cloning.

Rationalising Imperialism

Francis Wheen, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions*, Harper, 2004. Paperback, 338pp, £8.99.

Reviewed by Bob Pitt

THE TITLE of this book is not encouraging, with its thoughtless reference to an eighteenth-century Mandingo deity. Why should it be an aspect of West African religion that has become a byword for nonsense rather than, say, one of the many absurdities of Christianity? Er ... perhaps because the colonisers of Africa were themselves Christians who justified their oppression and exploitation of its inhabitants by depicting them as ignorant, superstitious savages who had to be "civilised" by European conquest?

At least we are given fair warning that an anti-imperialist sensibility is not to be expected from the author. And so it proves.

The book's theme is contained in its subtitle, "A Short History of Modern Delusions" (it was originally going to be "A Brief History of Bollocks", but the publishers demurred). The text comprises a series of often sarcastic attacks on various of the author's ideological *bêtes noires* – monetarism, New Age gurus, postmodernism, New Labour, creationism, militant Islamists – rather pompously dressed up as a defence of the Enlightenment.

At times it makes for entertaining reading. Who can object to Deepak Chopra or Tony Blair getting a slagging off? But Wheen treats the ideas he criticises primarily as stupid or malevolent thoughts in people's heads, without any serious examination of their material foundations and social origins.

Contrary to Wheen's critique, the free market theories adopted by Thatcher and Reagan were not just a product of wrong thinking – they provided the bourgeoisie with a necessary justification for the attacks it launched on organised labour and the welfare state following the end of the post-war boom. If postmodernist scepticism towards "grand narratives" has gained some purchase, it is not least because the forces who are the main agents of historical progress were severely weakened by the partial success of those bourgeois attacks. If forms of political Islamism have acquired mass support, this has some relationship to the fact that, whereas secular and leftist forces in the "Third World" were often defeated and discredited, the Iranian revolution and the Afghan mujahideen provided examples of political victories inspired by religious belief.

Predictably, in the closing section of the book Wheen lurches into an Islamophobic rant of the sort that has become fashionable among broad sections of the liberal intelligentsia. Rather as the colonialists regarded worshippers of the original Mumbo Jumbo, Wheen depicts Islamist militants as

no more than primitive savages who lack his own superior western understanding of the world. So Seamas Milne's suggestion that the 9/11 atrocities might have been inspired by certain genuine grievances against US imperialism is contemptuously dismissed as an apologia for mindless barbarism. Quotations from right-wing commentators are wheeled out to condemn those like Michael Moore who question the modernising mission of the West.

Admittedly, your reviewer has an axe to grind here, in that he is one of the more minor figures When polemicalises against. Regarding Afghanistan under the Taliban, When writes: "Valiant feminists who protested against the compulsory wearing of the burka or the abolition of girls' schools were accused of 'racist arrogance'. How dare they, living in the West, presume to pass judgment on poorer and weaker nations?" The reference is to an article by yours truly in the *Weekly Worker*.

Quite why it should require any particular valour on the part of western feminists to condemn the Taliban is not explained. Was Mullah Omar going to send out a hit squad to assassinate them? As for myself, in the article When quotes I made no mention of feminists at all and was in fact criticising certain self-styled Marxists who during the murderous onslaught by US imperialism on Afghanistan argued for neutrality on the grounds that the victims were reactionary Muslim fundamentalists who were no better than those who had invaded their country.

So much for the "Enlightenment values" When claims to hold so dear. When it comes to diatribes against his opponents on the left, intellectual honesty and even an elementary capacity for coherent thought desert him. Personally, I would propose an alternative subtitle for the book: "A Short Illustration of the Limitations of Bourgeois Rationalism."

US Imperialism Endangers Us All

Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, Penguin, 2004, Paperback, 278pp, £8.99.

Reviewed by Will Podmore

THIS BRILLIANT study is based, like all Chomsky's

writings, on a vast range of sources, including Pentagon, CIA and White House statements. He uses these to detail how the US ruling class seeks to rule the world.

It seeks "full spectrum dominance", weapons in space, greater powers of attack through "ballistic missile defence", and the break-up of all international treaties and agreements that might limit its ambitions. Chomsky argues that the US ruling class threatens an earthly wasteland.

He explains that the Republican-Labour doctrine of preventive war justifies all aggressions: Japan at Pearl Harbour and Hitler attacking the Soviet Union also claimed "anticipatory self-defence". He points out that the US and British states constantly use the Security Council to flout UN Resolutions; their record numbers of vetoes prove them to be its worst non-compliers.

Chomsky reminds us that the old British Empire proclaimed the right to "humanitarian intervention". Liberals like John Stuart Mill defended this, writing shameful apologetics for the imperial crimes of aggression against India and China, and for France's atrocities in Algeria, "exterminating the indigenous population", as its War Minister urged. David Lloyd George praised the British government's sabotage of Disarmament Conferences by "reserving the right to bomb niggers". Now Blair's adviser Robert Cooper writes: "the need ... for colonisation is as great as it ever was in the 19th century."

Chomsky notes that today's imperialists commit war crimes too. President Clinton flew Al Qa'ida terrorists from Afghanistan to fight for the US side in Bosnia. Labour imperialists backed the Kosovo Liberation Army terrorists, even though Defence Minister George Robertson admitted, "the KLA was responsible for more deaths in Kosovo than the Serbian authorities had been".

The same forces drive empires past and present. John Maynard Keynes explained: "the democratic experiment in self-government was endangered by the threat of global financial market forces." So now the European Union uses Eastern Europe to "hammer away at high wages and corporate taxes, short working hours, labor immobility, and luxurious social programmes", as the business press boasts.

In sum, *Hegemony or Survival* is an extraordinarily well-informed survey which shows how capitalism endangers us all.

Correspondence Welcomed

Send to: What Next? 24 Georgiana Street, London NW1 0EA
or email: whatnextjournal@yahoo.co.uk