



Publication details, information for authors and referees and full contents available at: <http://global-discourse.com/>

ISSN: 2043-7897

Suggested citation:

Bonnett, A. (2011) 'Author's Reply to Reviews of "*Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*" by Alastair Bonnett', *Global Discourse* [Online], 2: II, available from: <<http://global-discourse.com/contents>>.

All copyrights of this article are held by the author/s.

## Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia

*Author's Reply by Alastair Bonnett<sup>1</sup>*

*Left in the Past* emerged from a long-standing interest in the dilemmas of the left.<sup>2</sup> This interest was, in part, sparked by the fact that, even though it seems to have won the moral high ground, the left has, for the past forty years, been a political failure (at least as a set of political parties and movements). I don't think we can understand why capitalism has won the day without looking at this failure and, hence, finding new and critical ways of narrating left history. This is a controversial undertaking and I expected *Left in the Past* to have a bumpier ride than it has so far been given. It seems that a lot of people have been thinking in similar ways (and my two reviewers are both pretty positive about the book). At the heart of these concerns is the question of plausibility. The left is not plausible today and we need to work out why. I think Sarah Edwards hits on something very important in her review when she suggests that the book could have usefully explored the wider context of the idea of radicalism. For it is true that 'business-oriented' and religious radicalism have stolen a march on left radicalism. They are plausibly radical. The left, including liberal-left progressivism, constantly claims to be provocative and to own the future. But its ideas are more comforting than shocking. Moreover, it seems ill-equipped to deal with the present, never mind taking on the years ahead. Radical ideas that come from other directions are producing a strange and interconnected mixture of commercialism and post-secularism. Although they appal me, I recognise them as far more radical, far more socially destabilising and disorientating, than anything being spoken of by the left.

I tried to defend my interest in radicalism *as a left tradition* in *Left in the Past*, by suggesting that the affiliation of the left and radicalism remains widely understood. Yet I suspect, and admit, that the dissemination of radicalism may one day exceed this argument. For me this only highlights the necessity of analysing the left, of opening it up to new questions.

Jon Cruddas MP has picked up on *Left in the Past* and talks enthusiastically about it in a recent critical assessment of the way New Labour abandoned its traditions for neo-liberalism.<sup>3</sup> Cruddas sees the book as helping to open up intellectual territory for the return of the past to socialism (and perhaps for the return of Labour too). I hope he is right. It is certainly true that in chapter two I offer a sympathetic reading of figures like Robert Blatchford, for whom socialism was a set of popular traditions. Yet readers of the book cannot miss that I am interested in the paradoxes of denying attachment rather than in offering a manifesto. I approach Blatchford as

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Social Geography, Newcastle University.

<sup>2</sup> Starting with Bonnett, A. 1993 *Radicalism, Anti-racism and Representaton* (London, Routledge)

<sup>3</sup> Cruddas, J. 2011 'Full transcript | Jon Cruddas | LJMU Roscoe Lecture | Liverpool | 3 March 2011', available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/2011/03/labour-book-noonan-tradition>; see also Bunting, M. 2011 'New Labour insisted that the past be left behind. What a mistake that was' *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/03/new-labour-local-elections-nostalgia>

someone wrestling with these issues at a time when 'the modern left' was busy closing down nostalgia (and patriotism) as irredeemably suspect. These turn of the century critical traditionalists are fascinating because we see in them how popular memory and attachment – so long taken for granted in 19<sup>th</sup> century radicalism – were transmuted into 'tradition' and 'heritage', to be identified and defended. As this implies, I stand by the idea that Blatchford, and Morris, were politically defensive (contra Edwards). Indeed, the evidence for this is pretty solid. It would be odd, in an era that saw the rise of modern, technocratic socialism and Marxism, if they were not.

If there is a place in these two reviews where I myself feel defensive it is in the passage in Richardson's, when he segues from nationalist quotes by Blatchford to what appears to be an anti-Marxist remark I made at a seminar. This seems to take me deep into 'Blue Labour' territory. Richardson's review is very positive and I do not think that he is intending a critique by running the latter attributed quote from me after Blatchford's tub-thumping. However, I will take it as an opportunity to distinguish between the book's opening up of nostalgia, as a chronic facet of political life, and the idea that nostalgic radicals were right and the modernists were wrong. As I hope I make clear, I do not argue that nostalgia is a good thing but that it is inevitable, and that it needs to be acknowledged. It follows that those left political projects that do acknowledge it – even if that makes them paradoxical and odd – attract my sympathetic attention. I judge them to be more honest, more human and more politically interesting, than anti-nostalgic left politics. It is their attitude I value, not their political programme. This is the context for my interest in Blatchford, who is certainly an overlooked and extraordinary phenomenon. But I reject the impression, that readers might receive from Richardson's alignment of Blatchford and me, that I am motivated by an omnivorous hostility to Marxism or that I think Blatchford's 'Little England' socialism makes sense (indeed, as the quote from Richardson shows, it is a bit barmy). The remark from a seminar which Richardson quotes (in which I apparently claimed to be 'interested in any potential overturns and challenges to Marxism') does not do me any favours (it is a crass thing to say) and is not one I remember. But I don't intend to be precious about it. I do want to insist, however, that this remark be set in its proper context: that is, my critique of the inability of Marx and many Marxists to acknowledge the place of the past and nostalgia in socialist thought. This failure has compromised Marxism, both intellectually and politically. However, as I think the book makes clear, Marx was one of the most far-sighted social theorists of his day. He analysed the revolutionary power of capitalism in a way that is still powerful. What he didn't recognise were the paradoxes of communism. This is the nub of the matter. 'The left' has not developed a critical social history of itself. Perhaps it is absurd to expect a political project to be properly critically reflexive. The 'project' comes first. Critique is a tool in the service of the project. In *Left in the Past* 'the project' and 'the left' are called into question.

A natural response is, where does this get us? If the 'us' is the orthodox left, then the answer is not very far. But if the 'us' is people looking for a more honest and contemporary form of co-operative and democratic politics, then I'd hope that *Left in the Past* does perform a useful task. Either way, the book is both of the left and against it. It is not a happy combination for those looking for pat political answers. But it is I think a necessary one.

I'd like to thank both reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive contributions. Richardson largely offers a summary of the book's parts, so I have less to say about his review. He usefully raises the links between the book and my

subsequent attempts to look at nostalgia for the city amongst ex-residents. I admit that so far I have not been able to connect the two empirically, in part because the 'ordinary' people we have spoken to just aren't very interested in 'the left'. It is an academic issue these days (in every sense).

There are though a few specific issues raised in Edwards's review that I shall now turn to. I would defend myself against Edwards's important point about the difference between memory and nostalgia. She argues that today memory is not treated as a reliable form by scholars and, therefore, trying to challenge the exclusion of nostalgia from memory is to pitch-fork a straw man. I admit that the book doesn't spend much time on the large volume of work produced recently on memory. Moreover, the terms nostalgia and memory are sometimes used interchangeably, which supports Edwards's point that by reaction is overly defensive. However, I think the central idea, that memory is routinely valorised and nostalgia is not, remains valid. Indeed, even the key texts in 'nostalgia studies' - such as Boym and Hutcheon - display considerable anxiety over the term. This is why they go to such lengths to separate out 'good nostalgia' (reflexive, postmodern etc) from 'bad nostalgia' (simple, unreflexive etc). If even the key texts have their doubts, then Memory Studies will have to work hard to demolish the hierarchy which I challenge. In any case, my argument was not that memory and nostalgia should be collapsed but that 'fond memory' contains a nostalgic component.

A minor correction: I did not, I think, claim that Marx 'constructed his political rhetoric around an opposition between a barbaric past and a utopian future' (as Edwards says). My argument is that Marx - young and old - set his face against the past yet, at the same time, used the past as a repository of values and hopes (e.g.; in primitive communism). It is this to-ing and fro-ing that interests me in the book.

Finally, Edwards points out my 'cursory' treatment of 'women and feminism'. This is true. I try to make it clear how often nostalgia has been dismissed by being associated with women, home and hearth (and how the future has been associated with flinty-eyed and adventurous young men). The topic is big enough as to warrant its own book. However, a real regret of mine is that I did not pick up on it in the later chapters, where I write about the avant-garde. The split between Debord's macho revolutionary postures and the more cultural situationism developed within less sexist situationist grouplets is a great topic and, for me, a missed opportunity. Although it sounds rather obscure, the history of this split would have helped me unpack the avant-garde's curious and deeply gendered relationship to nostalgia.