

## Reviews

### Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

*Roland Bleiker*

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.  
pp. 289+xiii. ISBN 0-521-77829-8, US\$22.95,  
£13.95 (pb)

*Reviewed by Brian Martin*

Which is more important in bringing about social change: major nonviolent actions, such as enormous rallies and dramatic civil disobedience, or small challenges to conventional thinking, such as through the choice of words in a conversation? Many activists focus on overt, planned challenges to dominant institutions. Roland Bleiker in *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* presents the case that a 'slow transformation of values' is a more important process.

The book is ostensibly aimed at international relations scholars, who conventionally focus on the actions of governments and the dynamics of the state system. They normally ignore citizen protest altogether or see it as a minor factor in international affairs. Bleiker argues that 'popular dissent'—his expression that covers nonviolent action as well as less dramatic forms of resistance—should be taken into consideration. A local protest can now be broadcast globally, cutting across the national borders that international relations scholars usually take as the frameworks for political activity.

Furthermore, people can decide for themselves to act. In other words, they can exert 'human agency', something for which international relations scholars have no theory. Bleiker sets out to develop a theory for human agency, especially for 'transversal dissent', namely action that cuts across conventional boundaries such as national borders and normal ways of thinking.

How to proceed on such an ambitious enterprise? Bleiker takes an original route. He starts by following the trajectory of the idea of withdrawing consent from power, most clearly articulated by Étienne de la Boétie who in 1552 wrote *Discourse*

on Voluntary Servitude, arguing that oppressive government only survived because people acquiesced to it. La Boétie's text and ideas bubbled through the centuries, being used by later figures including Rousseau, Tolstoy, Gandhi and Gene Sharp. By tracing the legacy of la Boétie, Bleiker follows the way conceptions of popular dissent have been articulated through the centuries.

While he is quite sympathetic with dissent itself, Bleiker is critical of theories of dissent—such as Gene Sharp's consent theory of power—that propose one framework to explain the dynamics of dissent in all times and places. In general, he rejects any approach that claims to have found a solid foundation for drawing generalisations. Instead, he argues that dissent must be analysed in specific situations.

To illustrate the multiple ways of looking at power, he takes as his case study the collapse of the East German communist regime in 1989. He starts with a standard picture of the role of nonviolent action, in which emigration and massive rallies were the primary challenges to the regime. He then points out that a focus on citizen action alone is inadequate because it overlooks the wider political context, including changes in the Soviet Union, the role of West Germany as a haven for East German refugees, and the East German system of privileges.

He then presents yet another way of looking at the East German events, namely in terms of the impact on women, which in many dimensions was negative. This points to the need to reveal patriarchal aspects of both German unification and popular protest. Finally, he looks at changes in values in East Germany during the 1980s. The bases for resistance included the Protestant churches, which had some autonomy from the state, and West German mass media, showing a political and economic alternative as well as providing subversive cultural influences through music and novels.

Could the quiet transformation of values through such cultural influences have been more important than the massive 1989 protests? Bleiker thinks so. To try to show how, he looks at dissent through writing, specifically at East German underground poetry in the 1980s. The bohemian poets challenged conventional ways of thinking by using unconventional linguistic forms.

The case materials in the book—a genealogy of la Boétie's ideas, the 1989 East German revolution

and 1980s East German underground poetry—are fascinating in themselves, but they primarily serve as props for a high-level engagement with theory. Ideas from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Baudrillard and others are deployed with great insight but with few concessions to the reader who is not versed in scholarship in postmodernism. The writing is clear but intellectually is challenging in the sense of being difficult as well as the sense of being stimulating.

An analysis of linguistic modes of resistance in East German underground poetry is hardly enough to show that “a gradual and largely inaudible transversal transformation of values” (p. 271) is of central importance in global politics. That this mode of social change is important remains to be shown. Bleiker’s tremendous achievement is to put this process on the intellectual agenda, opening the door for further investigation.

The book raises as many questions as it answers. While both large-scale and subtle forms of resistance to domination are discussed, their interactions require more analysis. Bleiker argues that a slow transformation of values, fostered by small changes in language and behaviour, can lay the basis for major events such as the collapse of East Germany, but he does not discuss how major public forms of nonviolent action may foster a transformation of values.

The concept of a slow transformation of values through forms of micro-resistance sounds great, but what about a contrary slow transformation of values through processes of micro-domination? Advertisements, mass media news values and technological environments such as roads and buildings can all shape people’s consciousness. There are struggles at the micro as well as the macro level. Use of new linguistic forms in poetry can be a form of resistance to domination, but advertisers also use challenges to linguistic forms for very different goals.

Bleiker uses a refusal to buy non-reusable milk containers as an example of a form of tactical resistance that escapes the usual picture where there is a definite adversary. However, this form of consumer refusal also may be interpreted as a means for feeling that one is doing the right thing while leaving unchallenged the dominant forces promoting excess resource use, an argument long made by critical environmentalists. This example, while

minor in itself, reveals some limitations to the ‘small action’ approach to social change.

What does *Popular Dissent*, *Human Agency* and *Global Politics* have to say to activists? Bleiker is right that nonviolent action is increasingly visible across national borders, but nonviolent action that challenges political and conceptual boundaries is certainly not new in practice. The book’s main value is not in providing insight to activists but rather in bringing theory up to scratch with what is happening on the ground. Bleiker shows that international relations theory is hopelessly inadequate to understand citizen action and furthermore that nonviolence theory is too blunt to understand forms of micro-action. He performs impressive intellectual feats in his engagement with theory, highlighting useful concepts, juxtaposing contrasting ideas, and reorienting frameworks. In all this, the impression might be gained that action depends on getting the theory sorted out. But of course activists have long proceeded in big and small ways largely in ignorance of theorists (and some would say wisely so!). It may well be that activists as well social theorists can pick up on the ‘changing of the social climate’. So as well as looking to explain new modes of struggle by recourse to the ideas of Foucault, perhaps it would be just as useful to explain Foucault’s ideas as responding to new attitudes and modes of struggle.

Bleiker argues for acceptance of contingent foundations, saying that “grand theories of dissent run the risk of objectifying and entrenching forms of domination” (p. 140). I am sceptical that theories of dissent—such as the consent theory of power—have such an influence on dissent itself. Many contemporary activists are far more flexible than the stereotype of the dogmatic Marxist. Grand theories are more commonly used as resources than as straitjackets.

Bleiker states that “The manner in which a text is written, a speech is uttered, a thought is thought, is integral to its content” (p. 280). Yes, “language is politics” even as you read this review. Unfortunately, Bleiker does not discuss his own choice of writing style—accessible mainly to scholars—and how it relates to his politics.

Given these critical comments, I should emphasise that this is an important and immensely stimulating book whose ideas deserve a much wider hearing than its packaging facilitates. It puts the

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issue of small daily dissent on the agenda for analysis. How to assess the role of such dissent remains a challenge. Is it a valuable part of a transformative process or is it a ripple in the wake of the main splash/clash? Even more than analysts, though, the important issue of micro-dissent raised by the book is something that deserves attention by activists. And for the purposes of everyday dissent, everyone, whatever their involvement in groups and overt actions, is an activist.

### Harvest of Tears

Jean R. Williams, *Harvest of Tears: Vietnam's Hidden Legacy*, 2000, Homecoming Publications, 186 Coes Creek Road, Nambour, 4650, ISBN 0 9578217 1 9, pp.186, photos, index.

**Reviewed by John Knight**

Readers of *Social Alternatives* will be familiar with Jean William's sterling work on the longterm effects of the Vietnam conflict on Australian ex-service personnel and the lies, dishonesty and deceit of successive Australian governments and bureaucracy to avoid financial and moral responsibility for all this. As the late Fred Hollows said, 'Jean, the buggers want them all to die. They're now becoming a bloody nuisance...' And expensive as well, we might add.

At 75, *Harvest of Tears* is Jean's fourth book on these matters. However, this book is focused on the effects of the war and its cocktails of chemicals on the families and children of Vietnam veterans. *Harvest of Tears* lists a horrifying catalogue of consequences: spina bifida, cleft lip/palate, missing or extra body parts, Down syndrome, cancer, attention deficit... the list goes on. (Did you know that in the decade from 1988, the suicide rate for veteran's children was more than three times higher the national rate?)

Plus psychiatric disorders, post-traumatic stress orders, rages, cancers, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, respiratory disorders and allergies, diseases of bone and skin and suicides for vets themselves. (And what of the much greater rate of deformities in Vietnam itself?) Issues are meticulously documented, research reports are presented in appendices.

Two major issues previously not largely publicised are addressed: The parasitic worm, *Strongy-*

*loides*, affecting bowels, lungs, immune system. In consequence, chemotherapy for cancer victims can be extremely dangerous. And the anti-malarial drug, Dapsone, which was universally prescribed, was not intended for use with by those working in the sun, undergoing severe exertions, etc! Users were also intended to drink two litres more daily. Toxic reactions, cancers, etc are common.

But what's most poignant in this book are the stories of veterans, their wives and their families, and the terrible long-term psychological and physiological impacts of the deadly cocktail of chemicals used so indiscriminately thirty years ago. I don't want to continue. I'm grateful that neither I nor my children have had such experiences. I pray my grandchildren never will.

Buy this book. Order for your school, your local library. Talk to others about it. Ask why preserving the federal budget is more important than the lives and happiness of Australian ex-servicemen and their families. Work to ensure we never again have to participate in such a conflict.

### Funny Verse

Arcadia Flynn (ed.), *Ha! Funny Poems Vol. 1*, PO Box 1003, Maleny, 4552. 1999. ISBN 0643879 0 1, 103pp. \$15.00; David Myers, *The Secret Sins of the Suburban Swaggy: Comic and Satiric Pieces*, Phaedrus Books, 6 Logan St., Tenterfield, 2000, 124pp., ISBN 1 876780 02 9,

**Reviewed by John Knight**

*The Secret Sins of the Suburban Swaggy!* Neat title... What a great in-your-face cover too! Inside, verse – pert and impert – and occasional prose essays. There is indeed a lot of wishful hanky panky and essaying (most of it futile) in the collection. Comedy and satire, slapstick even. And not much political correctness either. Some good belly laughs plus shrewdly perceptive social commentary, sometimes cynical, sometimes Swiftian in its savagery. Posing behind the masks, or stage-managing the show, it's pretty clear Uncle David, alias Old Silver-tail, is taking the piss out of some of our more sacred Aussie cows -- and bulls too.

So we get Quixotic gems like 'The Patriarch Without Portfolio', with lines like, 'After an up yours salute to a female judge/ who had nothing against men/ except their delusion that they were born to lead/ I was legally liberated from my super-