

Light on the New Left

ROY DOUGLAS

PART of the trouble with being a revolutionary is that there are lots of other revolutionaries about, and they all want to make different kinds of revolutions. Thus, if a revolution does happen, it is most unlikely to be one of your own favourite kind. (Sorry comrade! The first tumbril is reserved for revolutionary heretics, not for reactionaries!)

The current brand (or rather, brands) of revolutionary politics constitute what is known as the "new left." It is inordinately difficult to discover what the "new left" wants to do, not least because there are several groups who all want to do different things, and frequently hate each other like poison. Where the "new left" is of interest, however, is not in the blueprints for a new society which it offers (for these are often very blurred indeed), but in its criticisms of the existing one.

It is this power of criticism which makes *Counter Course** a fascinating book - at least in patches. It is a mass of articles, written by many different hands, and equipped with a bibliography designed to make even the academic mind indulge in a quiet little boggle. The whole thing is written by students and recent ex-students who are linked more or less closely with various groups of the "new left." It

provides a searching critique of the academic disciplines which they are required to study.

There can be very few people who would fully understand all of it. Your reviewer freely admits that he curls up when he sees calculus equations freely scattered over pages of print. On the other hand, some parts - notably the very funny essay, "Doing Eng. Lit.," are really worth reading. The articles on medical training and chemistry also appealed to him. It is probably wrong, however, to try picking out bits from a work of this kind; it must be seen as a whole. Parts of it, one suspects, are little more than examples of bright undergraduates pretending to be even brighter than they are. Other bits do really throw useful light on the sacred asinities of some academic courses, and university teachers will ignore those bits at their peril.

Running through the whole work is a sort of zany, Alice-in-Wonderland logic - at times palpably insane, at other times illuminating dark and murky places. If one may give some serious advice to these people, it is that they should consider their reader's state of ignorance more than they do, and not use jargon words without explaining them.

Has the book a message? Yes, it has. It is all too easy to look at almost any academic discipline

from the angle of the Top People - to think, for example, of sociology and social psychology as subjects which study how workers behave, rather than subjects which could study how bosses behave. To take a widely different discipline, it is very easy to learn quite a lot of chemistry, and yet never ask oneself why one selects certain chemicals for study and neglects millions of others. Is the selection based on economic use - possible profitability - or what?

So by all means go and read it. Great masses of the book are gobbledegook, but here and there you will find gems. When you get to the bits that float over your head, do what your reviewer did, and skip them. Oh, and by the way, as these people obviously have no clear idea about what should be done to make things better, they are presumably receptive of suggestions. Perhaps some readers of this magazine may be able to help them. . . .

AMIN THE MASOCHIST

UGANDA has imposed a ban on imports of scores of consumer goods. President Amin said he knew Uganda did not have facilities to produce cars but it was time she did and plans were being made to establish a car assembly plant.

**Counter Course*: a handbook for course criticism. Edited by Trevor Pateman. Penguin Educational Specials, 75p.