

20 Books/Politics/L

The p Andrew Curr

- The Politics of J. A. G. Griffith Fontana £1.25.
- The Government Britain. By J. (edition). Hutchinson £5. £2.95. 09 13134
- Open Govern Wrath. Royal Institute tration £1.90.
- The Local S Cockburn. Pluto Press £2.95. 904383
- New Trends Edited by D. K. Sage Publicati 4. £2.95. 803
- Local and Cen Kathleen Allse Hutchinson £1

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At what cost?

John Gretton on Bologna

Red Bologna. By Max Jaggi, Roger Muller, Sil Schmid. Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative £1.95. 904613 29 1.

In left-wing circles it is commonly and accurately said that the media are biased on the side of the status quo. Where television, radio, newspapers and books treat of serious political issues, they tend to do so in terms which render them accessible only to a smaller or greater elite. Where they are catering for a mass audience, the issues are trivialized and distorted out of recognition.

For the left, therefore, the question is (or ought to be—far too many of them are no less elitist in their approach than the establishment figures they love to hate): how to bridge that gap? How to make complex political issues real and relevant to those whose intellectual and cultural baggage is not enough to enable them to master—and relate to the world they know around them—the thoughts behind the writings of a Marx, a Gramsci—or a Castells. That applies to schoolchildren as much as to television-crazed factory workers or Egyptian peasants. And the question concerns both treatment and presentation.

Red Bologna is a good example of a praiseworthy attempt to answer those questions. Three Swiss journalists found themselves in Bologna in 1974 at the time of a Fascist bomb incident. Instead of just staying two days on their assignment, they stayed 10 months to write a book about the Italian city that has had a Communist administration for the past 30 years. With Renato Zangheri, an economics professor, as mayor, Bologna is the Italian equivalent of the French Marseilles, which under Gaston Defferre has known socialist rule for an equivalent period. And the Communists in Italy are probably as near to gaining control of the national government as the Socialists are in France. So it is certainly a good, topical idea to ask: what difference does it make to a city to have a continuous period of communist rule in an essentially capitalist society?

Furthermore, the book promises well. It is divided into chapters—urban planning, traffic policy, consumer policy, education, and so on

—that bear more relation to today's national and local political debates than they do to Marxist theory. But disappointment sets in from the first page. It is written throughout in the short sentences and short paragraphs that are the hallmark today of the journalist and politician. It makes for a good magazine article, easy to read for the slow reader, easy to skim for the quick one. But a 200-page magazine article is a bit much. Where there is none of the meatiness of a "real" book, and where no effort at all is demanded of the reader, the abiding impression—reinforced, alas, on closer inspection—is that only the surface of things has been touched.

We are left with a strong impression that, while Communist rule in a capitalist society may not be particularly good for socialism it can be very good for participatory democracy. But even there one is entitled to be a bit sceptical. Bologna has a model free-fare transport system and restricted use traffic system; but how exactly was the resistance of the Bolognese commuter and shopkeeper overcome? There is mention of an experiment of "flat-groups" for disturbed children, part of a policy of integrating all physically, mentally and socially disturbed children into their schools and the community. But how exactly did it work? What about the reactions from the neighbours and other parents? And so on. And how much did it all cost? What other socialist options had to be sacrificed in order to achieve it?

Perhaps not too many, since, at the end of the day, Bologna is in no better financial straits than any other Italian city. But the main point is that the authors, by writing it like a political manifesto—"look how much we have achieved"—have left their political flank exposed to searching questions of "how" and "at what cost". They have also left their technical flank exposed. In real life, most of today's urban problems are posed, debated and "solved" in technical terms, behind closed doors, by bureaucrats and political leaders. But none of those arguments—the ones that really need to be understood at grassroots level—are laid bare at all. In short, there are no case studies, no fact sheets, and, perhaps most damning of all, no critique from the other side. There is not even—what any competent journal-

ist should have been able to get—the telling quote from a fierce anti-Communist that would have highlighted the real socialist achievements of the administration. But the authors and publishers might reply that there wasn't space, and that, anyway, they were trying to keep it simple. Much is repetitive, and much else could have been cut anyway. And there are ways of presenting complex material in simple form. In fact, the book is designed with just that in mind. Set in cheap phototyping in bold type, with the pictures (too small) integrated into the text, footnotes and captions along the margins rather than at the bottom of the page (they really are easier to read that way—try it), the design was in the tradition of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. But it has not been properly used. As it stands, the book would have been better with a denser text and strategically placed summaries.

One example of the successful use of such a design is *The Battle for Tolmers Square* by Nick Wates, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul and reviewed in *TES* October 15, 1976. The story of the battle over redevelopment proposals for an inner London area near Easton station, it deals with complex historical, technical, financial and political material in an effective way by the imaginative use of diagrams, tables, pictures, type and lay-out.

The same sort of thing could—and in my opinion should—have and in my opinion should—have been done with *Red Bologna*. It is not easy, but perfectly possible, to use the pages of a book not simply as a space to be filled with printed words, but as a vehicle for presenting all kinds of visual material. With care, the reader can be given the choice of being guided through the evidence is there, without loss to readability.

To some extent, this approach can already be found in children's books and educational textbooks. (A couple of chapters in *Ways of Seeing* consists solely of pictures). What I am arguing for is an extension of this approach into the arena of political debate. The left, in particular, does itself no service—indeed, it falls into the trap set for it by the right—by countering technico-political arguments merely by ideology. And, sadly, that is the dominant impression left by *Red Bologna*.

Paperbacks

Gentlemen of letters