15 years; a life-support system for use in operations for heart attack patients en route to intensive care.

There is a road/rail car, a vehicle that runs equally well on the road or on the railway lines. This could lead to a really integrated, safer and more efficient transport system in a country such as Britain; whilst in developing countries it has the enormous advantage of going up gradients ten times steeper than the maximum for a train, cutting the cost of track building and laying to one-fifteenth.

The portable kidney machine is a particularly poignant example. Lucas Aerospace had been trying to sell off its kidney machine division to a company in Switzerland. The Lucas workers found to their horror that 3,000 people die in Britain every year because they cannot get a machine. In Birmingham, if you are under 15 or over 45 you are, as the medics put it so nicely "allowed to go into decline". Unless, of course, you have enough money to pay for one privately.

So the Lucas plan didn't just protect the kidney machine division but went on to design a portable version enabling the sufferers to continue a more active life and to retain their dignity.

Architect or Bee is written simply and with touches of Cooley's puckish wit which give it sparkle. Bill Richardson, Assistant Secretary of the ACTU, sets it well in the Australian context in his Foreword written specially for the Australian edition.

I can perhaps best convey its essential flavor by quoting a passage in which Cooley is making his plea for human-centred systems of organisation:

"The new technologies highlight the fact that we are at a unique historical turning point. We must not allow our common sense to be bludgeoned into silence by technocratic and scientific jargon, nor should we be intimidated by the determinism of science and technology into believing that the future is already fixed. The future is not "out there" in the sense that America was out there before Columbus went to discover it. It has yet got to be built by human beings and we do have real choices, but these choices will have to be fought for, and the issues are both technical and political.

If we ignore this we may find (and here he is quoting Norbert Wiener, the founding father of cybernetics) "All our inventions and progress seem to result in ending material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying life into a material force".

A microphone is not an ear, a camera is not an eye and a computer is not a brain. We should not allow ourselves to be so confused or wrapped up in the technology that we fail to assert the importance of human beings.

We have to decide whether we will fight for our right to be the architects of the future, or allow a tiny minority to reduce us to bee-like responses.

Architect or Bee is an important book. I would not be surprised if it becomes a classic, the modern equivalent of Bertrand Russell's earlier foray into the same field.


Alan Roberts, an activist in the anti-war and anti-uranium mining movements, is a Marxist who takes environmental problems seriously. In the last years he has written a number of articles on environmental politics, the nuclear issue and the implications of ecological issues for left wing thought and practice. This book, launched early last year in Sydney, brings together reworked versions of some of his earlier writings along with much that is new.

The whole that Roberts has constructed out of this material is not always as coherent as he intends it to be. The transitions between sections are sometimes as obscure as those of the philosopher Hegel whom he occasionally mentions. An introduction could have been a great service to the reader.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to discover the main themes of the Self-Managing Environment. Roberts' principle contention is that environmental degradation, in both capitalist and non-capitalist countries, is primarily a consequence of consumerism.

"Consumer values" refer to a complex of quite different goals and motivations: possessions as a major source of self respect, the future valued according to the hopes it holds out for fresh consumer satisfactions, the social system judged by its capacity to provide them (or the illusion of them), the continual creation of new commodities and new demands - all accompanied by, and depending upon, the downgrading of competing values and alternative satisfactions. (37-38)

Roberts exposes the reactionary views of those who tell us that we must all tighten our belts for the sake of the environment. But he also criticises the socialists who think that environmental problems will go away once capitalist ownership is eliminated.

Consumerism, Roberts thinks, is an understandable consequence of a system of production in which workers are deprived, dominated and manipulated.

That is to say, to continue with the alienated workplace is necessarily to prolong the sway of
consumerism and invite ecological disaster. And conversely: no ecological harmony is conceivable unless the producers control their own labour activities. (54)

The answer to environmental problems is therefore "self-management" — the full and immediate control of the workplace by the workers themselves;” (56) and social and economic planning which is built up from grass roots participation. The self-managing society, the dream of many anarchists, marxists and guild socialists "has now been put on the agenda by the ecological crises of our time." (63)

The other themes that Roberts introduces in his book bear on this main argument. He criticises the nuclear power industry not only for the dangers it poses to life and health, but as a “social project, predicated upon a definite social structure, that of capitalist consumerism.” (85) He describes some of the battles for the control of the workplace waged between workers and employers and the role of technology and “management science” in these battles. And he emphasises the continued resistance of workers to the drudgery and meaninglessness of their jobs.

Roberts warns us against those left wing groups and activists who hinder popular movements with their elitist conceptions or their attachment to old orthodoxies. He is particularly hard on those marxists who are suspicious of environmental movements because of their middle class composition. To insist on the working class purity of a campaign, he suggests, is to be untrue to the spirit of Marx, who looked for revolutionary potential in any movement or strata. Roberts is obviously sympathetic to environmental movements, community action groups, women’s liberation, the struggles of which he regards as struggles for self management, in a broader sense of that term.

The trouble is that when Roberts introduces and explains “self-management”, he uses the term in a narrow sense — to mean “workers control”. The broader concept of “self-management”, which he needs to link the struggles of other groups to the struggles of workers in their workplaces, is left pretty much to fend for itself. Roberts never makes more than a gesture towards explaining how “alienation” in community life and the problems of women in the home are related to alienation in the workplace; or how the struggle of women or of community action groups are similar to and different from the struggle of workers for control of their workplace; how consumer values are affected by the way people live in their families and communities. Nor does he consider how the broader notions of self-management and alienation could affect his main argument about the relation of consumerism and lack of autonomy.

Roberts is in effect doing what so many other socialist thinkers do: he focusses on production and the relation between workers and bosses; women’s struggles, environmental struggles, etc. come into the picture as afterthoughts and the nature of their demands are never integrated theoretically with the nature of the class struggle. Though he sympathises with these liberation and environmental action groups, nevertheless like the marxists he criticises, he fails to take them seriously enough.

Once we move out of the workplace into the community or family, then it becomes less obvious that “consumerism” is the problem, and “self-management” the answer. For Roberts, consumerism is irrational — the desire to acquire unnecessary goods. But when we look at how people’s needs are related to their lives, then his account of the roots of environmental degradation seems less satisfactory.

At one point he mentions that the nuclear family is a fundamental buttress for consumerism; each self-sufficient unit purchases its own deep freeze, refrigerator, dishwasher, washing machine etc which stand idle or underused most of the time. This is indeed irrational, but the irrationality is in the family and its situation, not in the heads of the people who buy these things. People buy washing machines and dishwashers primarily because they are necessary for carrying on a reasonable life in a society in which the family is expected to be a self-sufficient unit. Convenience appliances are particularly necessary for married women who work and then come home to do their domestic chores.

Cars are one of the most environmentally destructive of consumer goods. But to suggest that cars are popular because people are carried away by consumer values is to neglect the role cars play in daily life. The fact is that people who live a long way from work and shops and friends in a city with inadequate public transport do need to have cars. A lot of the consumer demands of people, in both the East and the West, may simply result from their attempt to obtain what has become necessary for life in a modern urban society.

To do something about the environmental effects of private transport and household appliances means that something has to be done about the organisation of cities, about the nuclear family, domestic labour, public transport, and no doubt a large number of other things. Roberts is right to emphasise that whatever is done will be done by the people directly concerned. But to offer “self-management” as a solution is no more helpful than offering the “expropriation of capitalists” as a solution. For Roberts “self-management” becomes a panacea for all our social and environmental ills.

One reason for Roberts’ failure to give his universal remedy a content, is probably his reluctance to give any directions to people: to say
what they ought to be doing or what popular movements ought to accomplish. He is extremely critical of those "experts" and self-appointed leaders who claim to know the line of revolutionary advance. He sometimes seems to be suggesting that Marxists should encourage self-management movements and otherwise keep out of the way.

Given the history of radical movements, his concern is laudatory. The trouble is that not all efforts by people to control what affects their lives are progressive. Community action groups can organise to keep black people out of their neighborhoods; farmers sometimes get together to break through picket lines. Marxists must do what they can to fight reactionary views and to present socialist ideas. There are good and bad ways of doing this, but if doing it at all is elitist, then I don't see how elitism can be avoided.

However, to suggest that Roberts is one of those socialists who presents us with outdated formulas for new situations, is clearly incorrect. In many ways, he is in the vanguard (if he will excuse this expression) of thought on socialism and the environment. It will take us some time to digest all the ideas he throws out - on science and technology, economies of scale, the relation between practice and theory, etc. It will be worth the effort. If his views are not always as coherent and well developed as we would like, this only goes to show that relating the concerns of environmentalists to marxist theory and practice is not an easy task.

It should be mentioned that the book is well written and often witty. It deserves to have a much wider circulation than its price will allow.

Film Review ....

**Breaker Morant**

Despite the love affair which *Breaker Morant* has had with the media — near universal acclaim from critics and film institutions alike (witness *Breaker's* clean sweep of the AFI awards last year) — as a film, it stinks. It is neither well made nor original, and without Don McAlpine's totally undiscriminating and/or doting relatives of the performers. As a political film — which its supporters claim it to be — it stinks to high heaven. The position it adopts regarding war in general, the Boer War in particular, Australia's colonial heritage and British imperialism are repellent and reactionary.

Let's take the first charge: that the film is boring and imitative. It relies on a familiar western motif — a revenge killing — crossed with a military courtroom drama. The unique feature of this military trial of lower ranks is the charge: not that the defendants refused to obey orders (*King and Country, Paths of Glory*), or that they should have disobeyed illegal or immoral orders (*The Man in the Glass Booth*) but rather that, if anything, they obeyed orders — or the spirit of the orders — too well.

The case concerns three volunteers in an Australian contingent attached to the British Army fighting the Boers in 1901. The volunteers belong to an "irregular" force established to combat guerrilla activity in the countryside. In prosecuting these activities, Morant, the officer in charge, orders his men to shoot prisoners, motivated in part by the hideous murder of his best friend in a Boer attack, and in part by what he understands to be the unit's irregular brief. The British Army court martials the three for violating the rules of war. Early on we learn that the trial is merely an elaborate ritual: the three are doomed for reasons of state, to placate the offended sensibilities of the German Kaiser who might be tempted to substantially support the Boer cause as a protest against British flouting of wartime codes of conduct.

The court martial is the central focus of the film's "story" opened out with flashbacks to the three defendants' lives in Australia and to the activities under review at the trial. We learn that the three — of whom one, Breaker Morant himself, is an expatriate black sheep and ne'er-do-well Englishman; another, Handcock, is a bit of a wide boy, decent but impulsive, who finds poverty and domestic regimens intolerable nuisances to be avoided in traditional ways; and a third, a young boy beloved of his mother — are basically good Aussies (in Morant's case, Aussiefied) blokes. All the much-vaulted male Australian virtues are on display in the flashbacks — high spirits and larrikinism; resourcefulness and mateship; hard-drinking and womanising. Easy-going, non-deferential, get-the-dirty-job done qualities abound. Our outrage that these flawed-but-decent men should be sacrificed to British Realpolitik mounts as the film progresses, a dimension, I might add, which is almost the sole movement to be found in this dreary film.

Since the "drama" resides in the courtroom, no amount of well-photographed sentimentalising of Home or rhapsodising of Action against the anonymous but omnipresent Boers can rescue the film from the doldrums of a slack script. For nothing much turns on the arguments in the courtroom; it is a foregone conclusion that they will all be found guilty and that one or all of them will pay the Supreme Penalty (sorry about the cliches, but the Boys' Own verities of this film lead one inexorably into Capital Letter Country). The courtroom merely provides a forum where the Australian contingent can demonstrate their cocky, irrepressible, unintimidated resilience (the defendants) and their conscientious versatility (Jack Thompson, the initially outclassed defence