Peter Beilharz began writing a book searching for a ‘third way’ between the traditions of revolutionism and social democracy. He concluded that no ‘third way’ existed. This is his story...

What right has the world got to change so much? Ten years ago my marxist friends and I had just launched a journal of socialist renaissance called Thesis Eleven. We had some crank mail from old trotskyists wanting to know if this referred to the eleventh thesis of the second meeting of the Communist International when it was, in fact, simply a reference to Marx’s idea that interpretation was one thing, social change another. Then we got poison pen letters demanding to know what we were going to do about it. Ten years on, the change has certainly occurred, though most of it is in diametrically the opposite direction to what radicals may then have hoped.

Ten years ago life was easy, or at least it was simple. The Labor Party was in opposition. And there were great hopes. Radicals spoke of ending commodity relations, splitting the Labor Party, ending patriarchy, ending poverty. Yet the dominant radical tradition—that of marxism—was also complicit in the Soviet experience, where somehow the negative dimensions of capitalism or industrialism had been established without the achievements of bourgeois politics. Few of the ills of the Soviet bloc were blamed on socialism, which was our idea anyway.

An important book out of that period was entitled The World Moves Slowly; the message was widely overlooked. Reformism was widely ridiculed as too little, too late. The radical Left had been largely abstinent during the Whitlam years, which led to a profound sense of guilt and disengagement and paved the way for the dissolution of the Communist Party as some activists moved into policy making and into the ALP or the unions.

In this context, I’d been working on a thesis on trotskyism which was eventually published in 1987 as Trotsky, Trotskyism and the Transition to Socialism. Taking trotskyism
as the exemplary experience of the revolutionary tradition in marxism, it identified that tradition as at best irrelevant, at worst outright dangerous. Social democracy, by comparison, seemed positively lethargic.

The new, the old motif became that vain hope which radicals have long had for a third way, a way not only between communism and capitalism, but also between bolshevism and reformism—a society which could be prefiguratively glimpsed in the lives of social movements, where transparent community relations could replace violence and conflict. Ecology and feminism thus influenced the arguments, but so did psychoanalysis and romanticism.

Now the revolutionary tradition has largely gone. Or has it? Our better historical and cultural sensibilities ought to warn us against the idea that bolshevism could simply disappear off the face of the earth. Bolshevism was, after all, with fascism, one of the two major revolutionary forces of the 20th century. Socialists before bolshevism had some similar dreams—the end of class, the end of conflict; for example, all those dreams you can find in Tressell’s Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, or in numerous other socialist tracts. Other points of reference, such as the idea of changing the world in the interests of other people even if they don’t recognise it, go back to the French Revolution and the Jacobin tradition. Various other bits of the bolshevik tradition mirror earlier arguments of romanticism; the idea that evil society corrupts innocent individuals who need only to snap their consciousness—or have it expertly snapped before them—so that the rotten edifice of bourgeois civilisation simply collapses, as it deserves to.

Yet, while the bolsheviks were inheritors of romanticism, they were also the most frenzied of modernisers. Trotsky, in particular, saw modernity itself as dizzying with success, took delight in the idea that all things apparently solid might melt into air, waxed as lyrical as Marinetti for the futurist dreams and prospects of the mechanical age. So all these themes, too, echo back through debates about postmodernity and speed. Bolshevism was bohemian, and bohemianism still is.

Bolshevism also became a major influence upon other, reforming traditions such as fabianism and social democracy. The Webbs belatedly became devotees of stalinism, if not Stalin—though at the same time they adhered to the legacy of Montesquieu, in which primitive peoples got the dictatorships which they deserved while the advanced British deserved democracy, or Westminster at least. But it will not do to syncretise these different traditions simply because they come to show certain affinities. What is striking, in fact, about the different socialist traditions viewed in retrospect is just how different they are.

Turning to the reformist traditions, then—in the first instance to disprove them and throw further light upon the desirability of third ways—I came to realise that there were no third ways, except in the sense that there was a plurality of cases for reform or for revolution. The arrival of the Hawke Labor government upon the whirring turbine of the ALP-ACTU Accord—served to reinforce the feeling that it was a good time to take reformism more seriously. But this would necessarily mean to analyse it comparatively, in terms of difference and in terms of national traditions. My initial purpose was to analyse the specificity of Australian labourism against this backdrop. The backdrop proved to be irresistibly attractive, as the differences between and within Soviet bolshevism, fabianism and German social democracy multiplied.

My book on labourism turned into a study of other people’s reformisms. Labourism, like socialism itself, would have to wait. Within bolshevism there were the futurists against the peasant-roaders, the scientists like Bogdanov and the Enlighteners like Lunacharsky; in fabianism there were the cranks like Shaw, the futurists (again) such as Wells, the romantics, the guild socialists like Cole, and those spiderlike Webbs, themselves far more complex and nuanced than the cliched stereotypes suggested. The Webbs emerged as especially interesting because they developed, in sociology if not in politics, a truly pluralistic way of thinking. Their Socialist Constitution for the Commonwealth of Great Britain of 1920 showed a still remarkable attempt to balance forms of property and forms of power. In the German tradition there stood the

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fascinating early pro-feminist views of Bebel, the implicitly anti-feminist views of romantic lovers of community like Tönnies, and head and shoulders above these, fascinating thinkers like Kautsky and Bernstein.

These then became Labour's Utopias, for they combined different senses of the possible and desirable, different hopes and fears, some of which had dominated the local Left, some of which Australian radicals (and others) had simply been oblivious to. These differences, as well as some shared features, are still worth canvassing now that we know that the socialist renaissance should never have been imagined in the first place as a renaissance of marxism. But this also suggests that the terminal crisis of marxism is not one of socialism.

Marxism in Australia into the 1970s and 1980s tended very largely to emphasise class, and to argue as though good politics were class politics. Exactly what such claims might mean was never so clear, as vying 'proletarian' leaderships failed to come to grips with the aspirations of actually-existing suburban proletarians. The irony was that thinkers like Bernstein had cracked this kernel long before, in arguing that socialism—the good society—ought to be conceived as the goal of the society of combined citizens rather than as the regime of associated producers.

More than this, Bernstein understood that revolutions don't work, at least not in the constructive sense. Lenin and Trotsky, of course, also knew this, but took the punt of seizing state power anyway. The carnival of revolution passed into the awesome aftermath of consolidation, the NEP beckoning Gorbachev. Bernstein and Kautsky knew that politics was the art of muddling through. They knew that reforms always go wrong, just in the same way that the toaster won't work when you're in a hurry. Bernstein, in particular, harboured no fantasies about worlds without conflict—indeed, thought the very idea to be preposterous. In short, the understanding emerged here that general problems could only have particular, historically contingent solutions. There were no third ways in organising housing or health either, if there were two alternative paths, both would generate unpredictable and unintended consequences. Humans were not perfectible, nor were they essentially good or innocent beings who had merely been malformed by pernicious institutions such as schools or families. Ours was a different ballgame.

This so-to-speak Freudian insight can be found in the pivotal work of Gramsci as well. For even if marxists of this sort did not thoroughly digest Freud, they began to question the possibility that the sources of human action are multiple and contradictory. We are all walking contradictions, combinations of prejudice and judgment, common sense and good sense. Or as the anti-psychiatrists put it in the 60s, we are all more or less crazy, depending on what day it is. Now if all this is true, then the idea of galvanising alliances of popular support for rational programs of social change is even more complicated and fraught with difficulties than it seemed in the first place.

The world, in short, is a mess; but this is not a message of despair. What it recommends, rather, is a sense of detachment as well as of passion. Neither interpreting nor changing the world is easy. Simple, absolutist gestures which blame poverty on the bourgeoisie or on the higher officials of the Department of Social security miss the point. Ideas of ruptual change are impossible, as Kautsky and Gramsci understood, because the old traditions reassert themselves the day after the revolution. The grand narratives about progress, about socialism lurking ready incipient within the heart of capitalism, simply aren't helpful. Progress, indeed, has become a major mythology for denizens of modernity, but now it is stapled together with its sustaining mythology of nostalgia, as Christopher Lasch argues in The True and Only Heaven. Socialism needs now to return to the smaller narratives of everyday life; the great narratives of state- and program-building have become lectures to empty halls. Problems of the distribution of social goods and resources remain central, but so too do issues of participation and citizenship.

G D H Cole's commonsense view was that the real issue was less poverty than slavery. Even if we accept that domination and asymmetrical relations of power are social facts, the challenge is still there. But here it's back to Bernstein, who like Robert Dahl more recently—and like Oscar Wilde, for that matter—rightly anticipated that democracy's biggest risks are mediocrity and indifference. The difference today is that we have to accept these. It's no good us demanding of people that they act even as reformists. They can legitimately choose passivity, or other forms of activity. For part of this whole process of thinking and rethinking also involves accepting that intellectuals do not know better; that intellectuals are not and should not be legislators any more than any other social type should be. Intellectuals have for a very long time been too self-righteous; but in politics, the intellectual has only the same right to speak as any other citizen. Recent travelling troups like Ideas for Australia seem to suggest that the critique of 'economic rationalism' has become something of a Trojan horse for today's social democratic intelligentsia to reassert their claims to power, or at least to influence. This suggests a logic which runs against another aspect of the Department of Social Security miss the point. 'Simple, absolutist gestures which blame poverty on the bourgeoisie miss the point.'

PETER BEILHARZ's Labour's Utopias: Bolshevism, Fabianism, Social Democracy is published by Routledge.