The ruling class tried to isolate the anti-nuclear movement from the new forces in the working class movement. Anxiety about their jobs is keenest amongst those directly or indirectly employed by the atomic plants. The massive criminalisation of the movement (over 500 jailed and subjected to investigation processes) is linked with the intention to extend the atomic industry; as well there is the question of the cutting down of jobs. Mass movements are considered in that light and they want to smash all anti-atomic activity before it succeeds in uniting the masses. Still, some of the PI Groups try together, partly to approach the unions, partly to acquire and spread more knowledge. Many know and understand the laboriousness of the work. They would like to support the workers’ movement and they find this a transforming and enlightening process. The anti-nuclear protesters, also, have no connections with the trade union activities of workers.

In recent months (since mid-February 1978), the decline of the anti-nuclear movement has been continuous. In Hamburg, the centre of the movement up till now, the groups have melted away. A large part of those still active, busy themselves (unfortunately not very successfully) with endeavours to defend the numerous accused activists who have been threatened with jail for many years; for instance, some of the trials against Hamburg citizens connected with the Grohnde demonstration over 200 km from Hamburg, are being held in Hanover in the daytime. Those who work cannot attend. So far, the understanding of people about the trials has not grown. Neither can new members be won through work on the trials.

Often judges, state authorities and police (believing themselves not to be observed by the public) commit massive infringements of the law. Police speak openly about their court depositions. Disproportionately hard methods are used; for example, arrest warrants are issued against those charged with allegedly kicking police on the shinbone (which later are proved false). Judicial openness is invariably confined to few persons, passes for observers are all photo copied, police are heavily armed in the courtroom, although everyone has been thoroughly body-searched beforehand. Every visitor to a trial is registered and dated and his/her particulars as a potential lawbreaker are fed to a computer. A loud voice often reaches to outside the court ordering the courtroom to be cleared in order to pronounce new fines and jail sentences. In the press and on TV almost nothing is reported of trial proceedings.

***********

Review

Regis Debray’s book A Critique of Arms is one of the most interesting I’ve read for some time. Many of the questions he raises, and answers, are similar to those being discussed in the Australian left today.

For many people in the 'sixties and 'seventies, guerrilla warfare was a heroic symbol of struggle against imperialism — and rightly so. Yet there were at least two kinds of guerrilla warfare: that of the Vietnamese and that of the Latin American guerrillas whose chief symbol was Che Guevara.

Associated with the Latin American guerrillas, and Regis Debray personally, was an approach to revolution which said:

Revolution = the armed road
Reformism = the peaceful road.

As Debray says in this book, this metaphor “with its suggestion of travelling leaves out not only the cost of the journey and its value in terms
of the distance covered, but also avoids the core of the problem: what sort of revolution does the road proposed lead to, and what kind of society will there be when the end of the road is reached?"

Debray is challenging much of the simplistic ideology on revolution and armed struggle which he himself proposed a decade ago.

He isn’t now reversing the equations, or becoming a reformist. He’s trying to develop a synthesis, as they say.

He is saying that the leap into guerrilla warfare by small bands of truly heroic people in Latin America was ill-founded. As he notes himself, this “theoretical” mistake was paid for by the prodigious shedding of blood by many of the finest men and women of Latin America.

Again and again, Debray looks at the guerrilla adventure from different angles. He repeats the lesson: without mass support, the guerrilla is doomed.

Yet if that was all he said, he would make a true but obvious point. He goes further than that, particularly when dealing with the concrete example of Chile — of that more later.

Debray begins with words:

Like Third World. And national liberation. What kind of term is it that lumps together the utterly dependent, fragile, neo-colonial African states (say the former French colonies of West Africa) with countries with a significant industrial base, a history of European style parliamentary democracy and much higher cultural level (like Chile, Uruguay)?

Answer: a misleading, bourgeois term.

“National liberation”? Again, very misleading when applied to most Latin American countries.

Their revolutionary struggles are not simply “national liberation” struggles.

Two “strategies” dog the Latin American revolutionary:

1. The struggle is a national liberation struggle. This can mean searching for an alliance with a “national” bourgeoisie which degenerates into class collaboration. “When you ask the masses to sacrifice themselves for a cause not their own, it is hardly surprising that they refuse .... ”

2. The struggle is anti-capitalist. Differences among the bourgeoisie are ignored and alliances with the petty bourgeoisie and backward workers are not bothered with. Trotskyism’s “pathological refusal to understand national feeling, its inability to grasp what is peculiar to any given situation,” is an example of this.

Such differences stem from a misleading analysis of what Latin America is. He traces the few mentions of Latin America in Marx’s works, and the proceedings of the Third International:

“At the Second Congress the delegates from the Latin American communist parties tried in vain not to let their countries be listed under “the colonial system of imperialism”.

Neither neo-colonies nor advanced capitalist countries, they are a hybrid. Debray is trying to hammer out a truly applicable revolutionary perspective, one feels, for the first time.

Revolutionary struggle in Latin America has a national character “something which is gradually disappearing from the developed West .... ”. This is combined with a more traditional (to European eyes) anti-capitalist struggle.

Stalinism distorted most previous attempts at the same. The needs of the anti-Nazi struggle in Europe caused the communists to label Peron’s movement a “fascist” one, he says.

In the ’fifties, the years “of the Stockholm appeal” and “ambiguous worldwide pacifism”, the necessary preparations for armed struggle (say, in Cuba) were not made.

He deals with the actual path of the Cuban revolution in a fascinating way.

The pace of events, apparent immediate popular support and triumphant defeat of the army are explained. The Cuban reality was quite different from the disastrous Cuban-style experiments elsewhere.

In terms of book length, the centre of the book is a long look at military struggle.

The most interesting part of A Critique of Arms deals with “The Testing Ground of Chile” (the chapter title). Just as many have looked at the Italian communists’ experience, so the Chilean experience is also useful.

The Chilean attempt to build socialism represents “not a tactic but a strategy of international relevance — the strategy of a “democratic, libertarian and pluralistic” transition to socialism, say the Chileans, according to Debray.

The essence of the Chilean gamble was not the construction of socialism on the (economic and social) level of production relations, while leaving the (political) superstructure of the bourgeois state intact indefinitely.

“The Chilean hypothesis was that the class nature of the state could be transformed without being first destroyed. It was to be taken over as it stood: it would then be destroyed (or destroy itself a bourgeois government, to re-form as a revolutionary government) by the irresistible force of the changes in the economic infrastructure.

(It’s fascinating to note that in 1966, Salvador Allende, at the Tricontinental Conference in Cuba, reported that his Socialist Party saw political action in Latin America basically taking the form of “an armed struggle for power”.)
Within the Unidad Popular there were different interpretations of this strategy: “Some envisaged the passage from the phase of the “institutional democracy” to the phase of the “new popular state” as occurring through the growth of popular dual power, independent of and outside the existing apparatus of the state; they foresaw a gradual transfer of sovereignty to representative workers’ bodies, until a confrontation .... became inevitable.

“This was the strategy of the Socialist Party and the left wing of the Unidad Popular. Others envisaged that passage occurring through a weakening of the economic and financial potential of the rich, monopolist bourgeoisie, the neutralisation and even gradual absorption of the middle classes, until an absolute electoral majority ensured the emergence of a unified Chamber by plebiscite. This was the strategy of the Communist Party and the right wing of the Unidad Popular.

“Advance in order to consolidate” characterised the first, “Consolidate in order to advance”, the second.

Neither, it seems, could fix another problem:

At the beginning of 1972 it became apparent that the success of the UP’s economic offensive was not being matched by any comparable political activity. That its economic successes were converted into difficulties and failures was precisely because the way was blocked politically. A dislocation of the capitalist economy which is not accompanied by an equivalent dislocation of the capitalist state seems to end in the paralysis of both.

If there is no effective centralisation of economic resources or proper planning, the capitalist discipline of work disappears and there is no proletarian discipline to take its place.

Allende himself pointed to this: “We have none of the advantages inherent in these systems, but we have the disadvantages of both.”

A lesson of Debray to which I attach much importance is “Crisis is the only solution”.

The revolutionary process (one might even say “politics”) is not a linear one. A transition to socialism is a jagged broken line.

“ .... the successive phases of a fierce class struggle are not articulated mechanically, but dialectically. At every fresh turning-point there is a more intense crisis, until the break comes — the moment of radical dilemma when all one can do is to leap either forwards or backwards, in a violent swing either to left or right .... it is like a staircase where to move from one landing to the next, you have to jump over the missing steps .... always a risky proceeding ....”

History insists on playing double or quits, says Debray sardonically.

In many ways, the Chilean process couldn’t have gone any other way, says Debray The circumstances were not possible for a breakthrough in Chile.

This pessimism is sad. And it seems to contradict other statements in A Critique of Arms: .... the Chilean process was to come to more than one fork in the road; there was probably three that were decisive, and in each case the UP turned right ....

Yet we all know that humans can shape history (i.e. we’re not fatalists). One chain of events may lead to quite a different conclusion than another chain of events if both start from the same fork in the road.

The UP gradually merged a policy of reform with a reformist concept, he implies.

“The arming of the proletariat, or the squaring of the circle” is one appropriate chapter heading. He poses the dilemma of how to defend the revolution against the armed might of the state.

He suggests sarcastically to the “experts” who pronounced their sermons while Allende’s body was still warm, that perhaps they’d like to place textile workers in Hawker Hunter cockpits, asks them how long they suggest for training others in tanks, artillery and seamanship.

The problem was to know whether, and to what extent, it was possible, materially and politically, for it to become armed at all without precipitating the direct military intervention which it was precisely its object to prevent.

One aspect he doesn’t take up is the possibility of “diluting” the ranks of the armed forces by mass conscription. As well, he doesn’t discuss the problems or possibilities of politicising or neutralising the armed forces by means of the Presidential/executive power.

These experiments are being, and will be, tried in Western Europe in the next decade. So it’s perhaps appropriate to end with Debray’s final question.

(The problem is) how a popular government which has come to power by “reformist” means (i.e. within the framework of the bourgeois state, and precisely because the state was so healthy) can gradually become “revolutionary” (i.e. break out of the framework which gave it birth and legitimacy at first, but rapidly became stifling); how it can be in a position to confront the inevitable and terrifying counter-attack of the bourgeoisie, who still hold all the instruments of State power that has not changed.

In Chile it was unable to achieve the necessary step up, or leap, or breakthrough. Would the same be true where historical conditions are incomparably more favorable — in Western Europe?

— David McKnight.