THE APPEARANCE OF JACK BLAKE’S BOOK, which was written on a grant from the Socialist Research Fund, is very welcome. It is an important event because (regrettably) so few Australian Marxists have written books. It is an important book because it deals with fundamentals of the problems of revolution in Australia as a particular case of a modern industrialised capitalist country. In doing so, it also puts on the plate difficult questions of theory and action that are, to me, not always clearly posed in the book, and discussion of them can considerably assist their resolution.

Blake’s central thesis is that the old model of revolution accepted was one applicable to countries in which the ruling class and its organs of power had become isolated from the people (Feudal France, Tsarist Russia, Chiang Kai-shek’s China, Batista’s Cuba, etc.) and where dire material poverty affected the majority and assisted the formation of a desperate revolutionary mass which overthrew the old society. Such circumstances, Blake points out, neither gave the time nor focussed attention on the need for development of a cultural hegemony of the revolution in opposition to that of the old society and its rulers. One consequence of such a failing was that the socialist societies which came into existence in such a way failed to make the needed revolution in human relations, concentrating on industrialisation and developing varying degrees of Stalinism.

In modern capitalist society, not only is power less clearly seen (the “ruling class” cannot be precisely determined because ownership and power are not so direct, but mediated through managers and bureaucrats), but it is also less depended on to maintain the system than cultural hegemony — the values of society, hallowed by tradition. Thus the central position of values in the modern revolutionary process, and the need to consciously reject the former overly political and organisational orientation of revolutionary movements with their drive to centralisation and fascination by political power, neglect and even deriding of values, and general anti-intellectualism. One prominent agitator on the goldfields in Victoria in the latter half of last century is reported to have habitually concluded his speeches with the epigram

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Moral persuasion is all humbug, 
There's nothing convinces like a lick i' the lug 
and large numbers of Australian workers and revolutionaries have certainly been of that opinion.

Today, there is growing evidence of the rejection of the values of capitalist society in many circles, and in the growing number of movements of the people such as those concerned with the environment and pollution for example, as well as in more traditional fields. This both points a direction and gives hope that the great power (especially of containment) held by the existing system can be and will be undermined "from within" — thus the title of the book.

Why has this new characteristic and this new possibility appeared? Mainly because of the scientific and technological revolution and the changes in capitalism accompanying it which have emphasised the emptiness and inhumanity of present human relations, has increased the number and awareness of the intellectuals, and is restructuring the work force in a way which can overcome the old separation of mental and manual labor, and the mutual antipathy of workers and intellectuals. It has also given, for the first time, the possibility of a new revolution with a new, far deeper, human content. Allowing for greatly different conditions, a similar type of transformation is possible and necessary in the existing socialist countries.

The central thrust of action under the guidance of the newly developing values is self-management in all spheres from factory to local to university. This is essential to prevent a recrudescence of stalinism, rule from the top, authoritarianism. It can prevent the still needed organisation and central planning from overshadowing self-management because the base will be strong in spirit and in actual control. It is possible because the newly structured work force — better educated itself, and with closer links with the general culture through the intellectually trained members now in it — can run things without owners, professional controllers and bureaucrats. The central point of activity of revolutionaries should therefore be in the work place.

This general line of reasoning, which is of course argued in the book itself at much greater length (and given necessary qualifications) is coming to be more widely held, and I for one support it, particularly the emphasis on the central place occupied by values. In fact, I would have liked to have seen a development of the question in its philosophical and other implications, but of course the book had purposes which probably precluded that.
Jack Blake deserves congratulations on his efforts, and the best form of this would be a wide study and discussion of the book. To Outlook, now unfortunately ceased publication, should also go congratulations for what must have been a costly exercise in publishing. Again, buying and reading the book would be the best practical form such support could take.

One hopes that the wish to stimulate criticism and questioning was a major part of the intention. I emphasise questioning because, although there are qualifications and recognition of other considerations which may meet what I have to raise, the impression remains that there could be important differences in understanding various statements.

One general criticism is that in a book which, correctly to my mind, stresses the need to re-examine and challenge old traditions, the tradition is continued of claiming, as a support for a point of view, that it is based on the one true interpretation of marxism. It may be, but who is to decide which is the true interpretation when there are many — and not only the “official” ones which hardly merit the title — but ones held by numbers of respected theoreticians and activists? It would also be desirable, where criticisms of crucial points in Marx are made, as they are in a few places, that the implications of the criticism for marxism as a whole might be pursued.

There is also an impression of determinism which still persists despite qualifications — in fact, direct rejection of this standpoint. In the penetrating criticism of stalinism and in other parts there seems to be an implication that the rise of stalinism was inevitable, since its basic cause lay in the nature of the working class of those times, as determined by lack of education, anti-intellectualism, and the consequent lack of any strength or outlook except that of collectivism. It might be said “it happened, and therefore it was determined”, but this would be begging the question of determinism, particularly since similar questions arise at any time, including today.

And was this the cause of stalinism, or was it rather one of a complex of interacting influences which worked out differently in different countries, and could have worked out still more differently given a different state of consciousness by a number of people? Or even a different series of “accidents” with individuals — e.g. a longer life for Lenin, and a different succession after his death?

There is the same impression given by the discussion of the Australian ethos, mateship, etc. The debunking of previous idealisation is necessary and beneficial, but despite the present
fashion it is hard to accept the view that a system of beliefs and values such as this could develop in one, and only one, way. Nationalism, for example, can have different effects and different development depending on conditions and the activity and consciousness of actors in the situation. (Compare, for example, the different significance of nationalism in Vietnam, China, and Australia today.) It seems to me that the Australian ethos of the past had elements which could have been developed in a socialist direction if more participants had been more conscious. If we then say their lack of consciousness was itself determined, what we are left with is determinism, even if of a somewhat different form from the old.

Even if my assessment of the possibilities in the old Australian ethos is rejected as wrong or now unprovable, the consideration does not disappear, for the problem of the line of development of existing consciousness — that of intellectuals and intellectually trained, for example — still remains. To say that the values held by these strata are, unequivocally and inevitably, liberating, would be to adopt a kind of sociological or structural determinism. Blake does, in fact, correctly point out that many intellectuals tend to think of their position as one of personal emancipation, their natural point of attachment as being to the capitalist establishment, and that technocratic and elitist conceptions exist among them.

The intellectual culture is certainly absolutely essential for human development, and contains vital elements of humanity, rationality, democracy and so on. But it would be a mistake to think these can lead in only one direction. No “facts” are completely value-free, nor is “rationality” in looking at them a fool-proof “formula” which can give rise to only one — the truly human — way of interpreting them. For example, Blake points to the importance of teachers as an example of the intellectually trained in the present situation and struggles, and they certainly have much to their credit. But anyone acquainted with Australian teachers will recognise also that they have shortcomings including, according to one survey, being the most authoritarian in the world. And the famous German physicist Max Planck, who first formulated the quantum theory, once said: “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”

To point such things out is in no sense to detract from the great achievements of the students in particular in injecting new values and action onto the scene, which has done so much to begin stimulating a revival in the revolutionary movement as a whole.
It is only to point out that the intellectuals and intellectually trained should not be idealised as “the workers” were previously. The presentation in the book drives me to the conclusion that elitism and paternalism by intellectuals towards workers has crept in, despite qualifications and condemnation of such attitudes, and the stated ideal of a creative interaction. Nowhere is there any real indication of what workers might contribute to this interaction, but we are told that “... a people is as revolutionary as its intellectuals and intellectually trained. ...” (p. 118) and that present society leads to irrational functioning and the misuse of natural resources, which “come into conflict with rationality and the more developed critical human awareness of the intellectually trained strata” (p. 121). But are not others conscious of this too, and showing so in action?

Values were developed in society before even literacy existed, and while the great importance of the connection with intellectuals stressed by Blake is welcome, the establishment of this connection is not likely to be assisted by implications that the experiences, and feelings, and thoughts of other strata can only be inert and uncreative. Take for instance the strike of the Water Board workers in Sydney recently. This was an assertion of the right to human dignity in employment (two migrant workers were sacked for refusing to put up with a foreman’s abuse). Still more of this sort of mateship and solidarity, over something that most intellectuals would have little experience of, will help to bring human values into actual life.

I agree with the emphasis on criticism of past elevation of organisation, and in particular deification of (communist) parties, but feel that Blake has taken, from Lenin’s view for example, only one side — the greater “material” strength obtained through the organised collective. In fact, another, no less important aspect of Lenin’s thought was that of “protection” and development of a particular view of the revolution and its issues which otherwise could be swamped in the diversity of opinion and great mass action then proceeding. Perhaps this is elitism; if so, then so is every book or article written to criticise people’s “false consciousness” and tell them the true one. Anyone who gets out a magazine with a definite viewpoint or strives in factory, institution or organisation to influence his or her fellows evidently feels that they have the truth and others do not. If they also feel the necessity to combine together with those of like views to get out a newspaper, exchange experiences and provide a focus (not a substitute) for activity, they will be forming an organisation or even a party. And Blake himself points out various “erroneous
views” which need to be criticised and combated. These will not cease “organising” for their views just because others do.

In other words, it seems to me that equally important with criticism of past organisation and parties is to actually refashion them to prevent the recrudescence of authoritarianism and to meet the needs of today. This is admittedly perplexing and difficult, but is no less important than recognising and participating in the new autonomous movements. In this connection one wonders at Blake’s view of the Communist Party, to which, as far as I know, he still belongs. In 1956 Jack Blake saw far more clearly than anyone else the purport of the 20th Congress of the CPSU, and for this he deserves great credit. Probably he is justifiably resentful (as are many others from various periods) at the treatment he received. But objectivity seems to be lacking in the statement that the reason for the change in the party’s direction was merely a desire to “refurbish its image” (p. 117). The documents of the party’s last Congress published in 1969 and other analyses, and efforts at action to match, all bearing on issues raised by Blake, have a good deal more substance than that.

There can be no complaint if people do not want to belong to an organisation or think a particular party is not relevant, and uncommitted people are not (as they once were thought to be) second class revolutionary citizens. But the predicted forms of future revolutionary organisation seem to be an unjustifiably big jump from the theoretical and factual data given. This is related also to the time scale of the analysis. A tendency to restructuring of the work force certainly exists and is to be welcomed. But it will be many decades indeed before it will be of a kind which will overcome the division between mental and manual labor, nor does Blake speak of the reduction of “human” work content which is also taking place. More importantly, even if the theoretical analysis were fully correct, it may well be that in the next couple of decades, with population, resources, environment and other issues injected among the old ones, battles crucially affecting the future course of humanity will be fought out. The passion, will, fantasy and organisation that will go into this may be more distorted than it would be a few decades further on, but maybe recognition of the urgency and pace of things would constitute a more real basis for preparation by revolutionaries.

All in all, a stimulating and important book. One hopes that the discussion of it from supporters, opponents, and those like myself who think it has much merit, will be conducted as a real dialogue, and not as contention in which one side thinks the truth is already established and known.