There are no lesbians on television. It used to be the Golden Rule. Well, there was the occasional, passing reference on a Wednesday or Saturday night movie—a minor character, or an insult, or a joke. Think hard now; there was Steven Spielberg justified it by saying he wanted to make a film people would “go to see”: ie, a film about black people and not about lesbians, whereas, in fact, Alice Walker’s book was about black lesbians. The Hunger had an ill-fated but tasty fling between Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve; but you didn’t see much because of those damn billowing white curtains, and anyway it was OK because one of them was a vampire. Ditto the simmering look and three-second ‘afterwards’ scene between Jodie Foster and Nastassia Kinski in The Hotel New Hampshire. Jodie was a sexual assault survivor and Nastassia thought she was a bear; they both returned to the straight and narrow within about ten minutes of movie time; what more can you say?

In Good Morning Vietnam Robin Williams made a joke about women in comfortable shoes, and in Julia Jane Fonda decked a guy and then threw a table on him just to be sure he got the message when he said that she and Vanessa Redgrave were lovers. (They weren’t Surprise.)

I’m sure there are a few more examples but, in 15 or 20 years of Hollywood filmmaking, I don’t really consider that much of an attempt. As for the made-for-TV genre the pickings are slimmer still. To my memory there have only been a few. In about 1980 there was a lesbian air hostess on Skyways (an Australian soapie, rather like Young Doctors but with air hostesses and pilots instead of nurses and doctors). Around that time, Prisoner hit the screen, too, with a long-running violent, sadistic prison guard Joan Ferguson and short-lived violent, sadistic (but misunderstood) inmate Frankie. In 1983 two lesbians who’d left their husbands and were raising kids together were interviewed on Faces of Change (a series of documentaries about Australian women) and in 1989 Gwen, a secretary on LA Law, revealed that Sam, her lover, whom she spoke to frequently on the phone was not the chap she’d thought she was. Interestingly, in both Skyways and LA Law (made nearly ten years apart) the character’s lesbianism is only revealed when a male character—her boss—makes a pass at her and she has to explain her rejection of him (as though a heterosexual woman in the circumstances would have had no ‘excuse’).

Now, in the last four or five months we’ve been flooded with dykes on telly and I, for one, don’t quite know what to do with it. Vixens (a group of lesbian motorcyclists) appeared on Hinch to talk about their anti-gay-bashing patrols of inner city Sydney. Two lesbians who were denied access to a Sydney hospital’s fertility program appeared on Sixty Minutes. Organisers of a recent lesbian festival and a lesbian conference appeared on Good Morning Australia to publicise the events (and were asked, incidentally, how their parents had ‘coped’ with their lesbianism). Then GP featured two lesbians seeking access to an IVF program and having a relationship crisis about who was going to be the birth-mother and who the co-parent.

So who are these women, these lesbians? Victims of violence, vigilantes, sadists, mothers, frustrated would-be mothers and creative, energetic women who organise cultural and political events for thousands of their kind but nevertheless broke their parents’ hearts.

Oh, and they’re lawyers, too. Yes, July saw the height of all things TV lesbian—LA Law’s latest and greatest (and thwarted) affair between CJ and Abbey. First they were friends—then “The Kiss that Shocked America”. Well, maybe it shocked American hets; I’m sure American dykes found it a tad disappointing: 2.8 seconds and no sign of any tongue. Still, it was the first ‘lesbian’ kiss filmed for television and hundreds of thousands of us were glued to our TV sets to see herstory in the making. There was the inevitable rejection and assertions of hetero- and bisexuality (Abbey and CJ respectively) and, over the next six weeks (yep, it got me hooked) we had the re-establishment of the friendship, some sexual jealousy, a date or two—finally!—Abby telling CJ she’s ready now. Granted, it was presumptuous, but only a male scriptwriter with instructions about the advertisers would have made CJ reject her in such clear terms (“consider yourself two things: dumped and relieved” for those of you who haven’t memorised it after several viewings on the VCR).

Now LA Law was great and fun, and probably the most watched 2.8 seconds of television ever screened, but I think it’s worth thinking about the images we’re seeing, who is making them and what it means for lesbians.

So what was good about it? Well, it made lesbians visible, it put women who were attracted to each other on screen in front of millions of people. It forced straight people to think about it. Lesbianism became ‘topical’—by which I mean it was on the agenda for once without us having to raise it. It also confronted the myth that homosexuals are so frowned on that one can’t even ruin a lesbian, any lesbian, at a distance of several hundred metres and there’s never any doubt about it. In that sense, although Abbey’s and CJ’s instantaneous disavowals of lesbianism were wishy-washy, there were also some positive elements to the scene. You had no warning, you never would have known—and it just goes to show that you can’t make assumptions...
Another myth the 2.8 seconds debunked rather nicely was that of the predatory lesbian—short-haired, confident, experienced, a tad manipulative, ‘unfeminine’—seducing a straight woman who is the opposite of all the above. It started off that way, with CJ initiating the kiss, but from there on in it was femmy old Abbey doing all of the chasing.

Furthermore, as in any stereotype, there is the grain of truth from which it germinated; a hell of a lot of women seem straight, even homophobic, until their attitudes are questioned and they are given options which they previously didn’t see as possible. And so, maybe in that sense, lesbianism is what your mother always feared: contagious. Maybe, after all, Abbey’s a dyke.

LA Law also broke down the friend/lover dichotomy that is so much a part of heterosexual romantic mythology. As though one either is attracted or isn’t, makes a successful pass or never speaks to the person again; as though there is no room for flux or for a continuum of feeling and action. Abbey and CJ care about each other and are attracted to each other, they’re in a relationship which will continue whether or not they become lovers.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it was not ‘the lesbian episode’ nor even ‘the lesbian episodes’ or ‘series’—it’s going to continue well into the new series later in the year. So, in this case at least, lesbians are not just a special interest episode, or an exotic hiccup; it’s not the end of the story. Homosexuality has long been associated with mental illness, being a registered psychiatric disorder until 1979, and still regarded by many as a sign of ‘maladjustment’. Now, I don’t know if the show’s creators put that much thought into it, but it just happens that in both episodes with explicit lesbian content (The Kiss and The Date) there was a subplot of severe mental illness. With The Kiss there was a concurrent storyline involving the trial for murder of a man with multiple personalities (all of them fairly unattractive). Weeks later when The Date screened there was the judge who ended up shooting himself because of a degenerative mental illness. The parallels may have been subconscious but nevertheless convey a dangerous homophobic meaning.

To return to more apparent flaws; both characters are thin, white, attractive, able-bodied, upper-middle class professionals. (The same criticism can be made of the two women on GP who, what’s more, ‘weren’t separatists’, ‘had nothing against men’ and ‘would provide a male role model for the child whatever sex’.) The message? If you have to be a lesbian, then be as much of a success at anything else of importance as you can. So we have tame lesbians, acceptable ones. In reply it’s often argued that to portray lesbians as short, chubby and crop-haired is to reinforce a tired old stereotype. So it’s quite a Catch 22: either lesbians are ‘feminine’ or we’re ‘butch’—either way we’re fitted into narrow constructions of what women are, that we have no part in building. Hence attractive or ugly are the only choices women have in mainstream portrayals and the image is oppressive either way. But why not non-Anglo or working class and ‘attractive’? I cannot recall ever seeing a non-Anglo lesbian on television.

What is the point of braking down one stereotype if it helps to build up another? All lesbians are not White and White lesbians should not accept the domination of images of White women as if it is ‘all we can expect’ or ‘a start’.

In other words, should lesbians settle back and feel satisfied to have found our niche in patriarchal culture? The networks finally realise there’s an untapped market (LA Law’s ratings were their highest ever on the night of the kiss, and there is some speculation that the beginning of another series hinged on that), the heterosexual viewing public decide to be interested or voyeuristic or liberal—and lesbians get a guest spot on a variety of TV shows, as long as we abide by the rest of the rules. I wonder, do lesbians really want that? Do we want, for example, to have advertising targeted at us? It disturbs me, I must admit, to think of lesbian feminists dashing down to the local newsagent to buy TV Week to see if there’s going to be a date next episode, and Woman’s Day because Amanda Donohoe was seen kissing Cecil Hoffman in an LA nightclub. Buying magazines one has sheer contempt for and rationalising in the process; well, I know it supports the monarchy and female braindeath and capitalism and is full of evil diets but, hell, it has got a lovely close-up picture of Amanda in those boots.

Not that I’m attacking those of us who did just that—after all, my press clippings are right up there with the best of them. I’m just saying that visibility is the first step on a long path towards even the most basic civil rights, and at each step it is important to measure just what is being lost and what is being gained.

I, for one, don’t want an outhouse of tolerance tacked onto the edge of someone else’s culture. I want our own culture. Images of ourselves that we create and control, that reflect our diversity and experience, that don’t trap us into suffocatingly narrow constructions of femininity. Images I can feel proud of. Images that don’t have advertisement breaks.

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McKenzie Wark looks at the utopias of the new postindustrial science fiction.

“Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parts ringing the core of Atlanta...”

This is how William Gibson, leading writer of the cyberpunk revolution in pop science fiction writing, visualises the landscape wrought upon the world by the second great wave of the industrial revolution. It is an imaginary description of an emergent terrain for both politics and culture.

Science fiction is the great pop literature of the first wave of the industrial revolution: machinery and rationality were its material; speed and power were its obsessions. This was also the material which much of the modern movement worked upon. Hence modern art and science fiction can be viewed as two distinct but connected cultural levels within the first machine age. As with much of avant garde art, the dominant threads of sci-fi narrative were projection and teleology. They threw into the future an image of a coherent aspect of the present, which was subsequently depicted in either a utopian or dystopian light.

The great socialist critic Raymond Williams has pointed out that the utopian wing of science fiction also had strong connections with the socialist movement. William Morris wrote his utopian vision of the future, News from Nowhere, as a response to what he thought were the overly statist and technocratic visions of another socialist utopian, Edward Bellamy. More recently, there have been attempts to revive the utopian novel as a feminist genre by Ursula Le Guin, Marge Percy and Joanna Russ, not to mention Callenbach’s Ecotopia. Nevertheless, this is not a dominant trend.

Writing in the American magazine Socialist Review, Andrew Ross has argued in favour of a revival of left-wing utopian science fiction. However, it is questionable whether there is really an avid public for such imaginings. Political culture, like religious culture before it, seems to be going through an intense and disillusioning process of 'secularisation'. Forms of fiction which imagine how the technologies of today will affect the political and cultural terrain of tomorrow, and project local and partial tactics for dealing with it, seem more the order of the day.

This is where the cyberpunk literature can be useful. Cyberpunk is an attempt to revolutionise the sci-fi genre and create a pop literature appropriate to the postmodern world. Where sci-fi was historically determinist and projective, utopian or dystopian, cyberpunk writing tends to occupy a flat information landscape, where grand historical meta-narratives have ceased to give a purchase on the real. William Gibson gives historical explanations linking his cyberspace present to our present, but casually, as if the development of cyberspace had altered the very tracks of history itself. The passage of time is registered more in memory. History appears in Gibson’s novels in the jumble of old and new brand names and products, in the juxtaposition of dirty back alleys with gleaming new facades.

Gibson’s labyrinthine landscapes of the postmodern city are neither utopian nor dystopian but, rather, to misuse a term of Foucault’s, heterotopian. Spaces are juxtaposed against each other; the lush hotel against downtown funk; the byzantine mansion against the spiritual colony. Overlaid upon this heterotopic jungle is the utopia of cyberspace. This is the no-place, the locus solus of pure data, no longer even language, the 'consensual hallucination' connecting those with power to each other. The heterotopic world of the street, full of grifters and drifters and data-cowboys is a space for a new underclass, cut off from the speed and velocity of cyberspace. Yet within cyberspace is still more disturbing hierarchy rules where all-too-human uses of the datasheets find themselves outwitted by artificial centres of intelligence.

The pathos of this postmodern sci-fi comes from the fact that it is not monstrous great machines, product of our reason and labour, that have become a power of our reason and labour. Rather, the virus of information, lucid or hallucinatory, and product of our unconscious desire, and play as much as reason and labour, has been woven into a net in which our subjectivity now plays itself. We no longer have roots, we have aerials. Even our psychopathology has been externalised in information technology. The old aesthetic philosophical and political connections between reason and technology have been severed. Technology is a surreal concept, demanding a post-Freudian psychopathology which has nothing to do with reductive diagrams of the family.

By grasping the impact of information technology on the unconscious, since JG Ballard and, particularly, William Gibson, turns the technical into a literal device for grappling with a language that is fully in the tradition of surrealism, but which does not require the myth of the avant garde to sustain its experiments. Gibson’s work is fully within the pop mainstream. The game it plays with realism and naturalism...
takes place within. New literary devices, disguised as sci-fi technology, allow the exploration of new regions of connection between language, subjectivity and the real. Gibson's particular novelty lies in dreaming up new information technologies and new medical technologies and quite 'literally' grafting them together within the body. Hence his work can support a double reading, as writing about subjectivity itself, using these technical devices as literary devices. Here a deliberately impoverished style of writing contains a wealth of technique.

The best writing in the new cyberpunk genre is without a doubt contained in Gibson's three novels: Neuromancer, Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive, and some of his short stories collected as Burning Chrome. (Two useful anthologies are Mirrorshades, edited by Bruce Sterling and the sci-fi issue of Semiotext(e), No. 14. Not much of the cyberpunk literature is up to the standard of Gibson's, but these two anthologies provide a representative sample from which the reader can make her or his own judgments.) Also of interest is the work of Sol Yurick, best known for his novel The Warriors and his non-fiction essay Metatron (published by Semiotext(e) in their Foreign Agents Series). His hallucinatory novel on the Kennedy assassination theme, Richard A and his story in the Semiotext(e) anthology are also recommended. Rudy Rucker's Software and Wetware novels, while not as erudite as Yurick's or as crafted as Gibson's, are written by someone a little more technically literate. All in all, a liberal dose of this literature ought to provide a glimpse of what may become the pop imaginary of the near future. In the words of Alan Moore's fabulous graphic novel, The Watchmen, "a world of impending exotic, glimpsed only peripherally".

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Australian Psycho?

In mid-August a 33-year old man by the name of Waite Frankum ran amok with a semi-automatic rifle in the main shopping plaza of the Sydney suburb of Strathfield, killing seven people. Police were reported to be disturbed by his 'ordinariness', and unable to find an explanation for the sudden outburst of random violence.

I had met Frankum, after a fashion, a few months before. He was driving taxis, and I had caught his cab to my home in Bondi. It was a late evening, and I was tired and disinclined to talk much. He mentioned that until recently he had been living in Bondi, not too far from my own flat. As he told the story, he had owned a clothing store in Bondi, and had mortgaged his house to raise the capital for it. The store had failed, and the bank had repossessed the house. He now lived in Strathfield, with his sister, and was driving taxis while he tried to put his life together.

The conversation stayed in my mind, more for the way it had been conducted than what had been said. Hundreds of small businesses have gone bankrupt, since this recession began to bite, and people's lives fall apart all the time. What struck me most about this individual circumstance, however, was the way my taxi-driver talked about the situation. His manner was preoccupied, his voice was flat and matter-of-fact; it was almost as if he was talking about the misfortunes of a third, absent, person. I attempted to respond sympathetically, but he seemed almost not to hear.

I remember most of all the end of our conversation. We had arrived at my flat, and I payed him. I got out and wished him good luck. He answered - I don't remember what he said - and drove off. But it was obvious that what
I had said had not registered in his mind. He was too sunk within his own malaise.

When I reflected on this conversation the day following the ‘Strathfield massacre’, as one of the papers called it, several things occurred to me. First, as the police had initially, bemusedly, acknowledged, my taxi-driver had seemed a perfectly ordinary person. He showed no outward signs of aggressiveness. He evidenced no obvious anger or bitterness towards Mr Keating, or the banks, or the unions, or any other hate-figure, for his troubles. He drove far more carefully than the majority of taxi-drivers. In appearance and demeanour he seemed cautious, controlled, precise, respectable.

The conventional explanation of ‘serial killers’ or other supposed ‘psychopaths’ is that there is something ‘wrong’ with them, something which marks them off from most of their fellows. Preferably, they should have had an unhappy childhood, an unnatural fixation, a deep-seated grudge or sense of hate. I could not imagine any significant respect in which my taxi-drivers’ conversation or reactions would have distinguished him from any other of many thousands of similar middle-aged Australian males. Newspaper reports, grasping at a sign of psychopathy, reported the suggestion that his unit contained ‘a large collection of violent magazines and books’, and, in particular, a copy of the novel American Psycho. The former could, I suspect, be said in one way or another of every second adolescent male in suburban Australia, while American Psycho is reportedly an international bestseller. If that made my taxi-driver a ‘psycho’, hundreds of thousands of Australian males are ‘psychos’ too.

It is easy to be glib about this, and indeed feminists and the Left sometimes are rather glib about the wellsprings of male violence in general, as opposed to its specific manifestations. Rather than say: my taxi-driver was violent in the way that hundreds of thousands of Australian males are ‘psychos’ too.

It would appear, to involve fantasies of violence towards other people. The violence, then, was in a sense an incidental outcome of the emotional paralysis which dominated his relation to his life’s predicament.

All of this is not a case for or against tighter gun laws (though I personally happen to feel them a good thing), or in favour of or against any straightforward policy response by which a government could reasonably respond to such an occurrence.

Nor, in any simple sense, does it help to ‘explain’ male violence in general. A great many young men in this society are undoubtedly quite happy to hit, bash or rape to express hatred or anger, whether against women in particular or life in general, and probably make little effort to repress the fact. In many if not most cases they may go throughout life causing surprisingly little mayhem. My taxi-driver, on the other hand, did not seem a ‘violent man’, yet seven families were in grief.

Perhaps that is why media and police alike need to ‘discover’ the psychopath in people who commit killings like those of Waite Frankum. What if it were not only psychopathic men who killed like this — nor even, come to that, apparently violent men? The strangest emotion I found in myself welled up a few days after the killings. As the psychopathic character began to take shape in the continuing media scrutiny, I felt a weird urge to defend the ordinariiness of a mass murderer.

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Power Politics


Stuart Rees has attempted a very ambitious project: to bring together various facets of human experience which result in empowering individuals and groups. He has succeeded in identifying several processes which have an empowering effect, but the breadth of this inquiry has necessarily resulted in a generally superficial treatment.

For example, his thoughts on the use of biography, while interesting, do not extend the reader's knowledge beyond what was achieved by early women's movement strategies for empowerment such as consciousness-raising groups. Rees describes biography as a means by which sense can be made of one's life, but this somehow descends into an injunction to write. The few examples and quotes from eminent persons who have found writing therapeutic does little to convince the reader of the suggested power of the pen. It is also unclear how biography could be of equal use to all people and groups. By hinting that this concept has universal application Rees created the necessity to outline the real difficulties involved in applying the concept across different marginalised groups. In fact, this is touched on briefly, but certainly not in the depth required.

The discussion of economic rationalism and social justice is by far the easiest section of the book to read; perhaps Rees is more comfortable in dealing with large-scale issues of empowerment or social justice than those at the local level, or in explaining the various steps of empowerment rather than how they all fit together as a world view.

But Rees struggles throughout the book to establish empowerment as a theory in itself. We remained unconvinced that empowerment is anything more than a theoretical concept/strategy contained in many social theories (although admittedly differently defined in each). The importance given to empowerment by Rees is certainly not in dispute. But his 'theory' fails to cope with the basic difficulty that different people and groups perceive empowerment and use empowerment strategies differently.

Rees criticises the limitations of consensus-based social theory and practice yet his book ultimately falls into this same category. His processes of empowerment appear oriented to renegotiating/arbitrating inequalities, without addressing the fundamental structural sources of power and powerlessness in society. The required skills Rees identifies are at best tentatively linked to empowerment, and one wonders at their inclusion. They appear to be those skills necessary for any good social work practice: evaluation, preparation, assessment, planning and administration, formal negotiation and advocacy. The discussion of these skills focuses on social workers, rather than upon their clients, as one may have expected from an empowerment theory.

The book as a whole falls between being a commitment to social justice, a condemnation of economic rationalism and an attempt to encourage the further politicalisation of social work and social welfare students and practitioners. Some interesting and challenging ideas are presented but are rarely developed enough to allow the reader to feel stirred to respond or act. This is a shame as surely empowerment is about stirring people to respond or act.

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He Told the Truth

Alla Dessa Dagar (All Those Days), by Kjell-Olof Feldt, Norstedts 1991 (presently in translation). Reviewed by Andrew Vandenberg.

We all know politicians lie. John Lennon sang: "You have to learn to smile as you kill, if you want to be like the folks on the hill". But those politicians who become 'king of the castle' on Capitol Hill usually lack skills in statecraft; we soon find their charm transparent.

After their political honeymoon as new leaders, they rarely persuade us that they differ much from 'the dirty rascals', that they do genuinely believe in espoused ideals, or hold any coherent vision of a better future.

The memoirs of the recently retired Swedish Treasurer, Kjell-Olof Feldt, persuade me that he genuinely believes in the ideals which he espoused when he dominated the Swedish political scene. I am persuaded of this by the openness with which he admits to his part in the skulduggery of politics in Sweden in the 1980s. He details his part in the making and breaking of the 1988 election promises of the Swedish Social
Democratic Party (SAP) and he outlines endless rounds of tough negotiations without omitting the double dealing and double crossing in which he engaged just as much as did the opposition parties’ leaders, his cabinet comrades, and the party’s trade union ‘Friends’. (These union leader Friends are very often treated to ironic capitalisation.) No one exposes themselves to this extent unless they sincerely do believe in some larger cause.

When I read Feldt’s fascinating revelations about the harsh realities of contemporary parliamentary politics, it was Gramschi’s ‘Jacobinist’ interpretation of Machiavelli, as a passionate, even somewhat moral, believer in the ideals of absolutist monarchy in large centralised states which came to mind. In Gramschi’s view, Machiavelli was essentially democratic because he revealed the beastly side of the noble art of statecraft not primarily for an exclusive readership of princes, but primarily as an eye-opener for the masses. Feldt’s account of political machinations uncovers a passionate belief in the historical tradition of popular mobilisation within the Swedish labour movement, and it can similarly be read as a publication designed to open the eyes of a wide readership.

But Feldt’s understanding of mobilisation might read: “if leaders frankly articulate recognisable problems more people will actively involve themselves in solving their problems”. Of course, much of the Swedish labour movement disagrees with his understanding of the “movement tradition”, just as most union movements around the world have disagreed with the public expenditure-cutting and deflationary policy directions of treasurers within governments of labour in the 1980s. Trade unions must adhere to a practicable vision of a just society with which to inspire their members, if there is to be any meaning in describing themselves as a labour movement. Hopefully, the effort Feldt has made to explain the grounds for the way he put his conventional ‘economic rationalism’ into practice will inspire his critics to rangsack their own ideological consciences. Perhaps then we will be treated to a fuller understanding of the traditions behind what is both electorally and organisationally the most successful labour movement in the world.

Ideological honesty became crucially problematic for Feldt, as he concluded: “My political problem came to be the way I expressed myself, more brutally than others, when I demanded review of current doctrines. At the same time I—perhaps too impatiently—sought concrete results from such a review. This led bourgeois commentators to describe me as a renewalist and an agitator while those who described themselves as ‘the Left’ thought I was a closet liberal and leader of the so-called chancellery Right. In any case, no one called me a grey social democrat any longer.” Since Feldt’s resignation his successor has managed to implement several of the reforms to scale down public spending for which he had long struggled. Feldt therefore wonders whether his own penchant for frankness hindered rather than furthered ideological renewal within the labour movement.

The people I spoke to in the months after these best-selling memoirs were published in Sweden in April, were divided over whether Feldt had harmed or aided the party’s chances in the upcoming September elections. Was Feldt contributing to the long-term intellectual respectability of the labour movement? Or was he kicking the party when it was seriously down in the opinion polls by revealing how promises were made so rashly in the lead-up to the previous elections, and then broken in the subsequent year? If a treasurer is to resign of his own accord then the least disruptive and most common time to go is in midterm, which is what Feldt did. But it is most unusual for a treasurer to write a ‘kiss-and-tell’ autobiography a year later, only six months before the subsequent elections.

The memoirs’ title comes from a couplet old issues and recount old slights. The factionalism’s inclination to resurrect is most unusual for a treasurer to write a ‘kiss-and-tell’ autobiography a year later, only six months before the subsequent elections. Party branch members and local trade union officials in Stockholm mostly agree that Feldt’s warts-and-all account of perennial problems in balancing budgets and restraining wage increases along the Social Democrats’ ‘Third Way’ (between inflationary Keynesian expansion and harsh Thatcherite contraction), has contributed to the intellectual respectability of the labour movement.

Others, such as secretary of the Social Welfare Department, Sture Korpi, and retired union economist Gösta Rehn (the architect of the famous ‘solidaristic’ wages policy) thought Feldt had only harmed the party. The Department of Social Welfare, because of its propensity to spend, and the unions, because of their ‘irresponsible’ wage demands, are recurrent targets for Feldt’s bitterness over the fruitlessness of his struggle to stabilise the economy.

Feldt resolutely pursues the failed factionalist’s inclination to resurrect old issues and recount old slights. The memoirs’ title comes from a couplet: “All those days that came and went, I didn’t know that was life.” He recounts more than once how months of impossibly long days of intense work within Treasury almost always ended in a failure to find the political openings for doing what was economically correct. But he also rises above the understandable temptations of the factionalist, to a greater extent than his opponents might give him credit.

Besides his interesting account of the pressures journalists put on government to make promises and deliver snappy headlines during election campaigns, Feldt’s memoirs will probably most interest international readers with his account of the inception, early success, and eventual decline of the ‘Third Way’. Highlights in this account include: the internal debates leading up to the ‘big bang’ devaluation of 16% immediately after the Social Democrats came to power in 1982; the unions’ support for devaluation and their initial toleration of high profits, high price increases, and eroded real wages for the sake of continuing to keep unemployment under 2-3%; Feldt’s stormy relationship with Olof Palme; the fortunate postponement of a brewing rank-and-file rebellion against wage restraint when Olof Palme was murdered in February 1986; and the poorly grounded international accolades of The Economist and the OECD in 1987 for the success of the ‘Third Way’.

There are two basic and related gaps in Feldt’s account of Swedish politics in the 1980s. The first is his anecdotal and unsatisfactory account of the controversial ‘wage-earner funds’ legislation in 1983. The other is his almost
total failure to explain the viewpoint of the blue-collar Swedish Trade Union Confederation, the LO, and account for his stormy relationship with the LO leaders. A couple of times he suggests that they were attempting to dictate government policy to the party leaders, while they themselves had no need to concern themselves about facing re-election every third year. There are a great many references to his feud with LO leaders Stig Malm and Rune Molin, and almost as many denigrations of the critical editorial line pursued by the LO-owned Aftonbladet (an evening tabloid with the second largest circulation in Sweden).

In the wake of financial deregulation, the international renaissance for private speculation swept through property and share markets in Sweden and elsewhere during 1987-1990. But there Treasury attempts to restrain aggregate consumption, greatly fuelled by easy credit, met centrally-placed resistance by union leaders who caused Social Democratic leaders a great deal of heartburn.

Feldt believes that Aftonbladet’s editor, the union leaders, and the rank and file all adhere to an outdated statist view of welfare reformism and distributive justice, a view which he believes misunderstands the complex relationship between capitalist production and incentive-generating distribution. But as his respectful critic Gösta Rehn put it: “How could such an intelligent politician as Kjell-Olof Feldt not understand that the high profits fuelled by the 1982 devaluation, and his continual calls for wage restraint, would put impossible strains on the unions and their leaders?”

Feldt does tell us that towards the end of his period in office he realised that wages were increasing in the 1980s at about the same pace as they had in the 1960s, so all the talk about the collapse of the Swedish model of industrial relations was uncalled for. The problem, as he sees it, lies in a general restructuring of the workforce away from manufacturing and towards services. This has had a long-term detrimental effect on productivity growth. The economy can no longer afford both the same pace of wage increases and costly new public reforms such as the 1988 election promises to extend parental leave benefits, to extend annual holidays, and to provide day-care centres for all pre-school children by 1991. Thus, whereas the long-standing Social Democratic treasurers of old had waged many a battle against those who would not accept no for an answer, he had been compelled to persuade cabinet Comrades and union Friends to act in ways in which they did not want to act:

When the editor of Aftonbladet reviewed Feldt’s memoirs he quoted Feldt’s review of British Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey’s memoirs. Of Healey, Feldt wrote that you should not read politicians’ memoirs if you are interested in the truth. Aftonbladet concluded that the same naturally applied to Feldt’s memoirs; this was his truth as he understands it today. Union leader Stig Malm echoed this sentiment when reporters asked him for comments. All he would say was; “You’ll have to wait until I retire and publish my memoirs”.

Perhaps then we will see an account of recent Swedish politics which counterbalances the former Treasurer’s account and digs up the deep ideological roots of the union movement’s highly controversial campaign for wage-earner investment funds.

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