

---

## Book Reviews

---

### Nirvana Blues

by John Nichols, Holt, Rinehart, Winston  
1981, \$14.95.

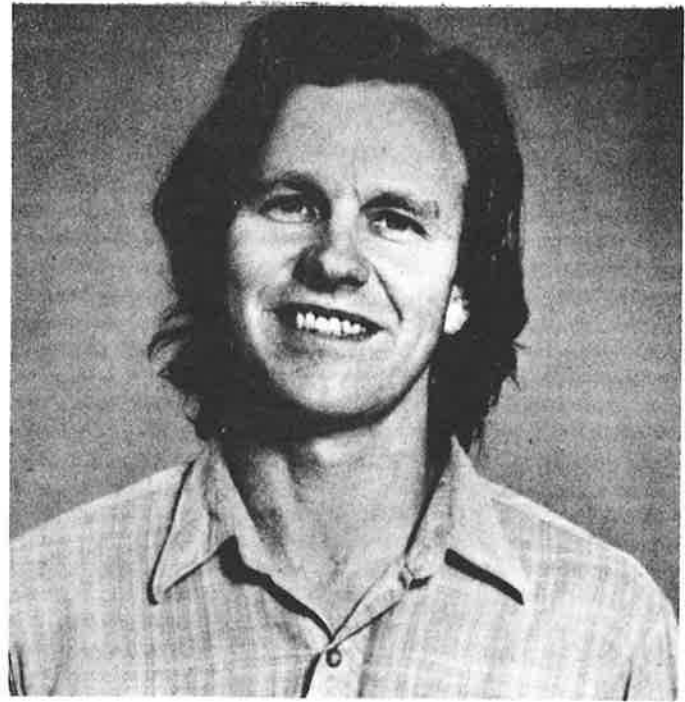
This latest novel by the talented left author of the *Milagro Beanfield War*, *Magic Journey*, takes a humorous yet tragic look at middle class America and its values. Interestingly enough, the story centers around Joe Miniver, a self-proclaimed Marxist ("he participates in all the boycotts") who lives in Chamisaville, a small but rapidly expanding southwest town.

In pursuit of the last farm plot in town, owned by the town's last and dying Chicano farmer, Joe Miniver's relatively stable life is first disrupted, then destroyed. In his "only chance" to break from the rat race of life and return to the earth (he knows nothing of farming) he must raise money and race against time to buy the land before all the other cast of characters can get their hands on it. Miniver's adventures begin with a coke deal to raise money, but soon he faces all sorts of predicaments with mobsters, religious fanatics, lonely women, lawyers, et al. Through it all Joe Miniver is swept along, alternately as an observer, a victim and a participant. Joe Miniver is a tragic hero. He tries to lead his life as an honest and caring human but is quite often confused as to just what exactly that is.

This novel, though, goes well beyond the personal struggle of its main character. It has an underlying thread to it—that people act out their lives thinking they are in total control of the decisions they make, but in fact are very much the product of an often hidden but nonetheless powerful ideological struggle.

From recent works by Ernesto Laclau and Goran Therborn<sup>1</sup> we are beginning to understand that people do not exist with all sorts of ideas and notions floating around in their heads, consciously choosing some while rejecting others. Rather, ideas and ideological elements (freedom, loyalty, family authority, justice) are combined together in a relatively cohesive, if contradictory, unity by means of an ideological discourse, thereby constituting us as subjects. There are many such discourses, each combining these elements in a different way, each competing with and often overlapping one another. These discourses, however, have a common tie; in one way or another they tell us who we are (in Miniver's case: American, educated, male, political), what is good (back to a simple way of life), and what is possible (nothing better). *Nirvana Blues*, while leaving us unsure of the author's positive answers to these questions, gives us insight into one of the dominant ideological discourses in the United States—the middle class, the "me" generation. By means of Joe Miniver and his encounters we come face to face with the contradictory aspects of the "good life" in America.

Yet this book does not take the form of an open polemic against bourgeois culture and ideology. Nichols has learned by his own practice (what we have learned through theory) that you cannot change people's outlook by confronting them with your perspective or your line, and say "choose!" Nichols explains in a recent interview:



John Nichols

During the sixties I wrote a lot of novels that were just nihilistic—you talk about dark sided views. I never published any of them. They were very much against the war in Vietnam and pretty despairing of our society and for a number of reasons I didn't or couldn't publish them. When I wrote *Milagro*, I decided I needed to try and survive as a writer and I figured that if I wanted to get my polemics out I'd have to find another way of doing it. I was just being hard-assed, you know, writing books that were up-against-the-wall-honky-mother-fucker-black-power's-gonna-get-your-mama. So I bent over backwards to be humorous and it worked.<sup>2</sup>

Popular novels, such as Nichols', can play a role in challenging and altering peoples perspective and Nichols is aware of this. In this way one laughs at the absurdities of capitalist America while at the same time being confronted with the complexities of who some of us are and what is possible.

There are aspects of and contradictions within Joe Miniver, and other characters, as well, that many readers will relate to themselves. For those of us who are struggling to change society, how do we simultaneously struggle to survive within it, economically and emotionally? How do we raise children to be anti-racist and anti-sexist while at the same time enabling them to function with "normal" kids in "normal" schools? How do socialist men and women relate on a sexual level amidst America's current crisis of sexuality?

This book is not without its shortcomings. Nichols' use of imagined newspaper headlines becomes a bit tedious, and the heavenly/angelic fantasies are a bit confusing. Readers familiar with his earlier *Milagro Beanfield War* (1974) and *Magic Journey* (1978) will notice an absence of the careful attention to the lives and struggles of the Chicano people which figured prominently in those works. But perhaps we should not judge John Nichols too harshly, after all, as he himself explains:

I'm not a working-class revolutionary. I'm a middle class writer. But we all have dreams and sensibilities and we all have a particular vision of what it takes to have the planet survive. It's hard because I believe I have a lot of hope for the future. And I think a lot of that comes from a political point of view that believes you can work with the present, you can change nihilistic tendencies, you can change through struggle.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Sanford

<sup>1</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, 1977, New Left Books, London; and Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, 1980, New Left Books, London.

<sup>2</sup> "An Interview with John Nichols," *The Bloomsbury Review*, Vol. 1, No. 6, Sept-Oct., 1981, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

## The Trial of Bukharin

by George Katkov, Stein and Day  
1969

In 1938 Nikolai Bukharin, former head of the Communist International and member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was found guilty of crimes against the Soviet people, sentenced to death and executed. This book leaves no doubt, if any could still exist, as to the utter fraudulence of the accusations against Bukharin. Worse, the trial fundamentally illustrates the full extent of the violations of communist principles which were in effect during the Moscow Show Trials of 1936-1938.

The author of this book does not offer us a Marxist analysis of the reasons behind the trial. That can be found elsewhere in this issue. Rather, he details the charges and refutes them systematically, drawing upon historical documents, inconsistencies in the prosecution's case, statements by the defendants and those who survived. The book also contains an appendix of actual exchanges between Bukharin and the prosecutor at the trial, as well as a biography of Bukharin and his co-defendants.

The trial of Bukharin was more exactly the trial of the "anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyists," and Bukharin had twenty co-defendants, including I. A. Rykov, a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee since 1905 and Chairman of the Council of Peoples Commissars in 1923. (Another Bukharin associate, Mikhail Tomsky, had previously committed suicide). The trial took place in Moscow in March, 1938 and followed the 1936 Kamenev-Zinoviev Trial, the 1937 Piatakov Trial and the 1937 (secret) Red Army Purges.

The defendants had been arrested in March, 1937. It took a full year for the prosecutor, Vyshinsky, to put his case together and to extract detailed signed confessions from all the accused. The state tried to demonstrate a conspiracy at all levels (which explains the need for other defendants) and within all regions of the Soviet Union. The charges ranged from murdering Sergei Kirov and Maxim Gorky (Bukharin alone was accused of plotting to kill Lenin in 1918!) to sabotaging food supplies and collectivization; from spying for Germany, Japan, England, Poland and Austria to negotiating with the Nazi's to throw open the Russian front to them in case of war.

To support many of these charges, the state went back to the intra-party struggles of the 1920s. What at the time was opposition to a given line (how many times was Lenin in such a position?) was transformed by the state prosecution in 1938 to be opposition to the party, the state, the Russian people, socialism, and the world proletariat! For example, Bukharin's opposition to Stalin's method of collectivization in the 1920s was seen in a new light—it was now acts of sabotage and the destruction of food supplies to further the aims of foreign powers.

The intent of the trial was not merely to get rid of Bukharin and other opposition leaders, but to rid the party/state of any and all opposition. This very neatly follows, of course from the concept of the "monolithic party." If the party line embodies Marxist "truth" then all opposition must be, by its very nature, anti-socialist and treason.

The transformations within the Bolshevik Party from a basically democratic style of struggle to an absolutely bureaucratic one did not happen with the advent of the trials. Katkov explores the practice that existed in the late 1920s and early 1930s where oppositionists (those who held minority views) were forced out of their positions (and often out of the Party) only to be allowed back in later after not only admitting their "mistakes," but also being forced to participate in the ritual denunciation of their former "errors." Unfortunately, Bukharin, too, capitulated to this terrible practice. In a speech before the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934 he said:

Comrade Stalin was entirely right when by a brilliant use of Marxist-Leninist dialectics he destroyed a number of theoretical assumptions of right-wing deviationism



Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin in 1937.

formulated first and foremost by myself . . . It is clear that Stalin was right in smashing every manifestation of fractional activity based on the theories of the Right opposition, and right in destroying its root and branch.

In that same speech, Bukharin mentioned how some of his former pupils had been punished "as they deserved."

*The Trial of Bukharin* unfolds a story of complete betrayal, in the 1930s of the socialist vision held by the Bolshevik leaders at the time of the October Revolution. The most elementary notions of socialist legality were not only ignored, but trampled upon, and with them the political practice necessary to construct a genuine socialist society.

Paul Sanford

*Paul Sanford is a trade union activist and a member of the Theoretical Review editorial board.*

## **The Incredible Shrinking American Dream: An Illustrated People's History of the United States States**

by Estelle Carol, Rhoda Grossman, and  
Bob Simpson, Alyson Publications,  
1981, 171 pages, \$6.95.

This publication is an ambitious attempt to present a Marxist interpretation of American history in comic book form. It begins with a portrayal of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England and covers the plunder of Africa and the Americas by the European maritime powers. Succeeding chapters provide a surprisingly sophisticated presentation of slavery, mercantilism, the American Revolution, Westward expansion ("Step Aside Buddy, I'm an American"), the Civil War and Reconstruction. The book continues through an analysis of industrialization, "Adventures in Imperialism," the Depression and both World Wars. Perhaps the most comprehensive chapters are the concluding ones on the "Nifty Fifties" and the mass movements of recent times. A valuable bibliography is included.

The book uses hundreds of jokes, caricatures, and cartoons to present its message in a humorous and popular style. The very density of this material at times hinders the overall readability of the book. However, each page contains separate narrative paragraphs which succinctly summarize chronologies, concepts, and biographies.

Throughout the book a militantly anti-capitalist, class-conscious viewpoint is projected, without much recourse to left-wing rhetorical verbiage. There is a strong sensitivity to the issues of national and radical oppression, as well as a critique of male supremacy. American history is placed within a solidly anti-imperialist, internationalist perspective, as exemplified by treatment of immigration, the Spanish-American War, Vietnam, etc. The final chapter critiques bourgeois ideological hegemony in the US by satirizing 23 "myths" which perpetuate belief in the system.

The book concludes with an appeal for a working class party and a proposal for socialism in America. The authors

are careful to make general criticisms of the existing socialist countries while presenting the transition to socialism as a long and complex historical epoch. *The Incredible Shrinking American Dream* helps to meet our movement's pressing need for popularly written works on American history and culture.

Ben Rose.

---

continued from 26

fact, there is no significant contradiction between comrade Levins' six points and the arguments and analyses of Lecourt in his book *Proletarian Science? The Case of Lysenko*. What is in contradiction is comrade Levins' defense of the notion of the existence of the two sciences (proletarian science and bourgeois science) and the theses presented above.

<sup>1</sup> Some introductory readings: J. D. Bernal, *Science in History* (four volumes, MIT Press, 1971); Rita Arditti, Pat Brennan, Steve Conrak, eds. *Science and Liberation* (South End, 1980); Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review, 1974); Dominique Lecourt, *Proletarian Science? The Case of Lysenko* (NLB and Humanities Press, 1976); "Science for the People," monthly journal produced by Science for the People, 897 Main Street, Cambridge, Ma., 02139.

<sup>2</sup> Lenin, CW, Vol. 14, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> Lecourt, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, p. 378.

<sup>5</sup> Bernal, Vol. 1, prefaces, pp. 1-18.

---

continued from 32

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>33</sup>Dobb (1928), p. 168.

<sup>34</sup>Dobb (1948), pp. 2-11.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 177-80.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>41</sup>Yakovlev, in *Pravda*, Nov. 5, 1927; in Dobb (1948), pp. 198-99.

<sup>42</sup>Dobb (1948), p. 192.

<sup>43</sup>*Ekonomicheskaya Zhizn*, cited in Dobb (1948), p. 220.

<sup>44</sup>R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivization of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-30*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 61-4.

<sup>45</sup>Dobb (1948), p. 203.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 216-17.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 204-5.

<sup>49</sup>Bettelheim, op. cit., pp. 382-5.

<sup>50</sup>Cohen, op. cit., p. 289.

<sup>51</sup>E. Strauss, *Soviet Russia*, pp. 156-57, 160-1; in Dobb (1948), p. 206.

<sup>52</sup>Dobb (1948), p. 206.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>54</sup>Eugene Zaleski, *Planning for Economic Growth in the Soviet Union, 1918-1932*, trans. by Marie-Christine Andrew and G. Warren Nutter, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. 164.