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Myths for Our Time

BY MAXINE PHILLIPS

IT WAS EASTER TIME, AND I WONDERED how the Sunday School teacher at our liberal Baptist church would present the Christian myth to my nine-year old daughter's class.

The story came home. "Look at this!" I said to my husband. "She's telling them a version of the Demeter and Persephone myth that I've never heard. Persephone goes to the underworld of her own free will and initiates the dead into the afterlife. There are no male figures. This must be from the prepatriarchal religions."

"No way," he grinned. "I bet some feminist made it up."

Sure enough. When I came across *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time*, edited by Christine Downing, I found the same story in the section entitled "In Search of a Prepatriarchal Vision." The author of this retelling, Deborah

Spretnak, "re-imagines" old myths. According to Downing, Spretnak consults ancient sources and then assembles "surviving clues," such as art and artifacts that evoke the ancient gods. She meditates to

"access a consciousness of the myth's presence," then writes the story.

Are her versions true? asks Downing. "Yes, as myths that have had powerful resonance for us."

Frankly, the traditional version, with the God of Hell carrying off the beautiful maiden, who becomes Queen of the Underworld, leaving her mother

crazed with grief and willing to let humanity starve unless her daughter

is returned, struck me as pretty powerful stuff, too. The many different versions and interpretations of this story in this book raise the questions of authenticity and power in myth. Which one speaks most compellingly to modern men and women? Or does there have to be

SPRING BOOKS ISSUE



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one version? Ever since motherhood gave me a reason to rediscover the myths and fairy tales I grew up with, I've been struck by their hold on the culture. I've also learned that much of what I accepted as the "true" versions in my childhood were sanitized versions from the eighteenth and nineteenth

Introducing more "authentic" material had little impact on my Rapunzels, who could not be shielded from the dominant culture.

centuries or Disney fantasies. But introducing more "authentic" material had little impact on my Rapunzels, who could not be shielded from the dominant culture. (Alternative books and videos, in addition to being less readily available, often do not have expensive, appealing graphics or large advertising budgets.) However, this material came in handy as we acted out the stories or as I read to them and augmented the text. As I, and I presume other baby boomers rediscovered myth through our children, there was an explosion of interest in the adult world. Robert

From the Editor

This issue is our first ever Spring Books issue of *Democratic Left*. We've included reviews of some of those books that will be helpful to you in thinking, learning and acting on your socialist beliefs. The reviews span both fiction and non-fiction books, works of history and political analysis. We plan to make this an annual special issue of DL. Let us know what you think—and give us your suggestions for future reviews.

—Chris Riddiough

Bly's *Iron John*, the PBS series on Joseph Campbell and the resurgent interest in Campbell's work, and the popularity of Clarissa Pinkola Estes's *Women Who Run With The Wolves* are examples. And all of these had political subtexts.

Marina Warner, a British anthropologist, looks at *Six Myths of Our Time* in a series of BBC lectures. She points out how the old myths influence our perceptions of current events even as we invent new myths. How much influence does a long line of stories about demonic women have on policies that attempt to control women's sexuality? Specifically, she asks whether the idea of monstrous mothers that finds early expression in the Medea

myth echoes in the current hatred toward single (read: welfare) mothers. What will be the impact of feminist and modern reworking of such myths (for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which Sethe, a sympathetic Medea, "distills the pure torment of a woman in the grip of a vicious history")?

Warner credits Roland Barthes with exposing myth as something that "transforms history into nature." Myths hide the political ideology of their time. They appear to be eternally true. Thus my own surprise at the new version of the Persephone myth. How could the author tamper with the "truth"?

On first reading I found the re-

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Democratic Socialists of America share a vision of a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. Equality, solidarity, and democracy can only be achieved through international political and social cooperation aimed at ensuring that economic institutions benefit all people. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements—of unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color—which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.

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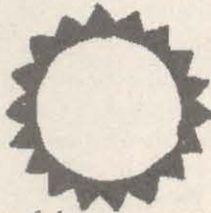
Escaping the Asphalt Jungle

BY BILL MOSLEY

Think of the recent and seemingly random issues and events that have been prominent in national or local headlines in recent years: the Persian Gulf War(s), the wreck of the Exxon Valdez, the decline of central cities, the fate of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, mass transit fare hikes and service cuts, the battle against Wal-Mart, the “end of welfare as we know it,” and summertime ozone warnings.

These events, of course, have a common thread—the dominance of the automobile in American life. (And I didn’t even mention auto congestion, highway fatalities or road rage.)

In *Asphalt Nation*, Jane Holtz Kay, architecture and planning critic for *The Nation*, attempts with considerable success to examine the car and its impact on the country in its totality—its effect on communities, social life, the environment, architecture, and the family. She lays out her point of view up front: She is a committed nondriver who finds the auto’s impact on the nation largely baneful.



“The nation is in lifelock to the automobile as the dominant mode of transportation,” Kay writes. “It is in its grip so securely that we can barely perceive how both the quality of mobility and the quality of life have diminished.” For most Americans, driving is the way to get around, and until recently most did not question the arrangement. However, she sees a shift in thinking: “The old consciousness is waning and with it confidence in our car-bound destiny.”

Kay begins by examining the current pavement-wrapped landscape and the costs, inequity and pollution that attend it. She then steps back to the dawn of the automobile, and how the revolution

spawned by Henry Ford gradually pushed aside the trolley and train and turned walkable cities into sprawling no-places. Finally, she examines the alternatives: better mass transit—and the denser, mixed-use development that can support transit, walking and bicycling—and a halt to the laying of pavement, even some road ripping.

Kay is hardly a pioneer here. Nationally, the movement to rein in the highway ranges from the mainstream Surface Transportation Policy Project to the anarchist-tinged Alliance for a Paving Moratorium. Local pro-transit and anti-highway movements have been coming and going for decades, usually mobilizing around immediate struggles. Kay acknowledges that “many recognize that we have moved as far as we can on untamed wheels.” She points to a number of local campaigns as examples of what can be done, most notably the grassroots effort in Portland, OR, that blocked highways, launched a light rail service and revived downtown. Even Washington has taken notice; the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 allowed communities to transfer a portion of their federal highway funds to transit projects.

While pollution, congestion, sprawl and highway fatalities are well-known products of the car, Kay focuses on some aspects of automotive hegemony that tend to be overlooked. The poor suffer through cutbacks in mass transit,

Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back. By Jane Holtz Kay. Crown Publishers, 1997, 358 pp. \$27.50.

highways that slash through working-class communities, and the flight of jobs from cities to fringe areas (the “end of welfare” connection mentioned above). Cars have had a disproportionate impact on women, Kay finds; in the ten years since 1983, women’s driving quadrupled due to commuting, errands and ferrying children. The car has exalted the private realm at the expense of public space, she concludes, with people oriented to their garages and steering wheels instead of front porches and sidewalks, and to malls instead of main streets.

Kay also debunks the highway lobby’s argument that cars pay their own way through gas taxes while transit and railroads are rolling welfare queens. Gas taxes, now at an all-time low in real dollars, account for only 60 percent of road costs. And this covers only the costs that can be easily calculated, without considering externalities such as environmental damage.



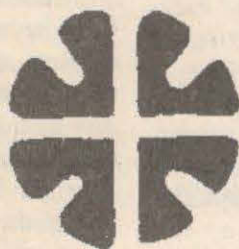
However, Kay virtually ignores a major force behind the dominance of cars and highways—profit. Even she argues the inherent advantage of the early car over competing modes, yet she under-

Don't Know Much About Socialism?

Neither do we. At least, not as much as we want to know. That's why you should join us for the 3rd Annual DSA Youth Section Summer Institute. The Institute is a unique opportunity for radical activists to get away from it all—to remember why we do what we do, and learn how to do it more effectively. There's no better place to learn about the past, present, and future of socialist politics.

While a date hasn't been set by the time of publication, the Institute will probably take place around the third or fourth weekend in June, definitely near New York City. If you're interested in attending, please contact Kevin Pranis at 212.727.8610 or kpranis@dsausa.org.

estimates the role of massive public investment in roads—which began well before the Interstate era—without which the car would have remained stuck in the mud. Ford, John D. Rockefeller and other entrepreneurs with money tied to the success of the car made sure politicians got that pavement laid. Today more than ever, private profit drives the construction of highways. Investors buy up fields and forests, pressure public officials to build highways through that land in the name of relieving congestion, and then turn over the land for development at a huge profit. All the new development creates *more*, not less, congestion—leading to another call for



more roads, beginning the cycle anew. Kay, in overlooking this, makes government's passion for highways seem merely perverse. In such a context, her two-paragraph account of the campaign in the 1930s and 1940s by General Motors, Standard Oil and other corporations to destroy trolley systems across the country seems more an oddity than what it was—the standard business practice of the auto lobby.

Kay strains a little too hard and with mixed effect for the *bon mot* when straightforward language would serve better. "In this geophysical experiment with our piece of the universe, it is at least arguable that we are making

Mephistophelian deals with extinction," reads one tangled sentence. At one point she writes that "we have reached the end of the age of the automobile viewed as an *unredeemed* good" (emphasis mine), when *unalloyed* or *unmitigated* would have expressed her intent more accurately.

While Kay recognizes the growing public understanding of the need to find alternatives to the car, she sends the reader off with perhaps a bit too much optimism over the inevitability of change. To watch the stream of hard-sell car commercials blasting from the tube convinces one that the car will not slink away quietly. Most people still regard more highways as the cure for congestion, and parking lots more convenience than blight. And too many people buy the commercials' identification of cars with freedom, sex, tranquillity, status and other emotional goods. Kay's book will provide ammunition for the already committed to use in organizing and public education. And those millions who drive out of necessity rather than pleasure may take heart. The sport-utility set, I'm afraid, will not be convinced.

Bill Mosley is an activist with DC/MD/NOVA DSA and a member of the Democratic Left editorial committee.

CHARNEY TO LEAVE STAFF

The Steering Committee of DSA has accepted a recommendation from Alan Charney to eliminate the part-time National Director position he currently holds, effective April 1, 1998, at which time Alan will leave DSA staff; subsequently he will act as a consultant for the organization on a month-to-month basis as needed. Chris Riddiough, DSA's Political Director, has been named Acting National Director also effective April 1, 1998. A search for a permanent National Director will commence thereafter. In addition, the NPC has assigned a committee to examine and make recommendations on staff structure for the organization. Their initial report will be considered at the May 2-3 NPC meeting.

Alan has made extraordinary contributions to DSA; in his new role as a volunteer, the organization will continue to benefit from his leadership, analytical skills and commitment to the socialist cause. The decision to eliminate the part-time National Director position serves the organization financially by reducing expenses at a time of budgetary austerity and coincides with Alan's personal desire to develop his own political work in new directions.

We urge all DSAers to join us in expressing our gratitude to Alan for his excellent work, and in supporting Chris Riddiough in her new role.

Dream Worlds/Shadow Worlds

BY CHRIS RIDDIOUGH

I just got my copy of the computer magazine *Wired* and noticed on the cover the phrase "the future is in beta." For those of you who aren't computer junkies, beta is something like the trial version of software. More and more it seems to be true—what was once science fiction is now fact, what was once the province of a few computer nerds has become the domain of the whole world.

Perhaps that means science fiction and Wells, futures that evoke the techno-corporate world we seem to be becoming. If the Multilateral Agreement on Investment is the "constitution of a new world order," as some would have it—the beta version of corporate rule—then Scott's books show us the final product: worlds where there are no governments, no democracies, only corporations guiding our destiny. They are worlds where a future version of Microsoft not only puts its own internet browsers on computers, but where such a Microsoft dictates where we live and what we know.

Dreamships tells the tale of space pilot Reverdy Jian. Jian flies starships through hyperspace,

tion is passé. One hundred years ago Jules Verne and H. G. Wells could write of flying machines and trips to the moon without the expectation that they'd happen before the books were published; today that's much harder to do. But perhaps science fiction still has a role in letting us see the real world implications of beta before it goes on the market.

That's what Melissa Scott's books do—they take us on a journey to our futures. They are futures more complex than those of Verne

using a complex computer to manage the interaction between pilot, ship, and hyperspace. In a search for a missing person, she confronts the first computer that might be true Artificial Intelligence (AI), and all the political problems she has been trying to avoid. For the missing man is not only the designer of the AI, but a founder of Dreampeace, the civil rights movement for artificial intelligence.

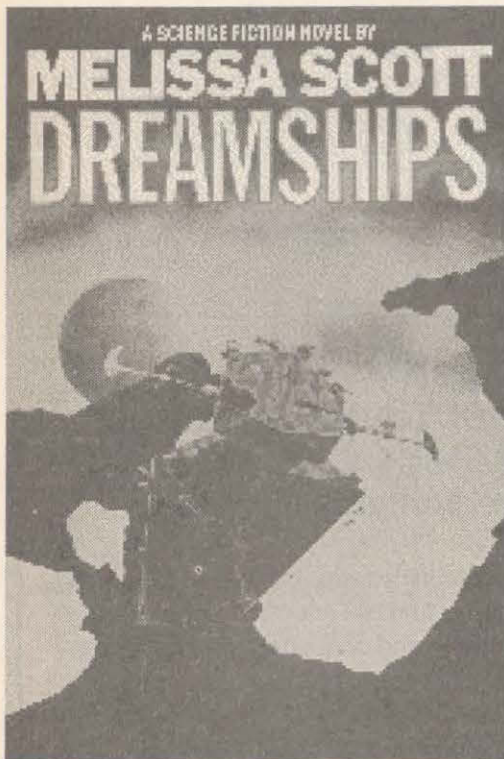
Dreamships by Melissa Scott, Tor Books, 1993, 352 pp.

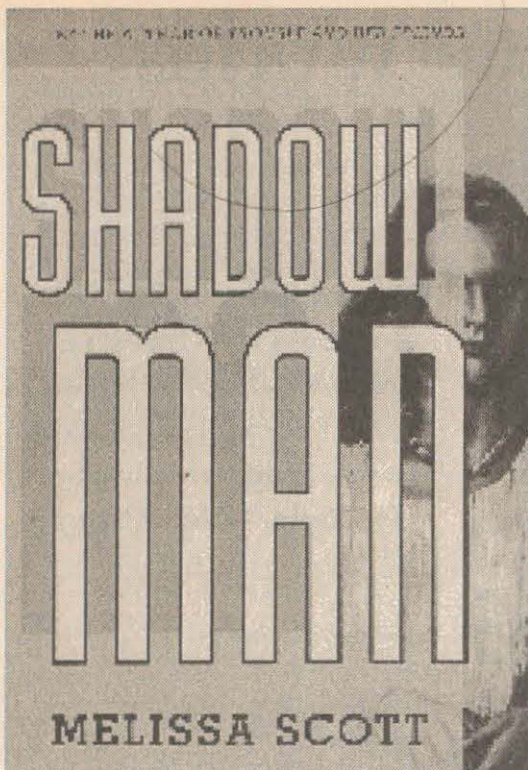
Dreaming Metal by Melissa Scott, Tor Books, 1997, 320 pp.

Shadow Man by Melissa Scott, Tor Books, 1996, 320 pp.

Her discussion of AI and ultimately, of what constitutes humanity is thought-provoking.

Dreaming Metal is a sequel to *Dreamships*, in which Melissa Scott further explores artificial intelligence and how it will impact society. Scott's society is one where coolie laborers struggle for existence, and where political groups fight their battles on the streets through protests, riots, and bombings. Reverdy Jian appears again





but takes a back seat to Celinde Fortune, a high-tech stage magician. Fortune plies her trade on Persephone, a planet where class struggle and economic and political upheaval are the order of the day. She combines two advanced computer chips to enhance her act, resulting in a true artificial intelligence.

Dreaming Metal takes us the step beyond *Dreamships* in exploring what intelligence is and what it means for human rights. It also takes us into the workings of a planet ruled by corporations, where not only AI beings have no rights—neither do working people. Class strata are clearly defined and there are few ways to break out of one's class. Scott goes beyond the usual cyberpunk fascination with technology to a real exploration of the impact of such technology on society. And she goes beyond most science fiction in portraying real class struggle. Her characters are not just worker bees or cyber outlaws, they're activists.

Scott also explores the role of gender in these books—we can't assume as we might in other scifi that

her space pilots are straight white men. Jian and Fortune are women and many of her characters are gay/lesbian. She takes the issue of gender one more step in her book, *Shadow Man*. This book differs from her other works which rely heavily on technology to set the stage for the drama. In *Shadow Man*, a winner of the Lambda Literary Award for Gay and Lesbian Science Fiction and Fantasy, technology takes a back seat. On most planets five human sexes have evolved due to use of a drug that allows humans to tolerate faster-than-light space travel. On the planet Hara, however, the powers that be have refused to

acknowledge this plurality, insisting instead that all people identify

themselves as either male or female. Warreven is a Haran who is neither a man nor a woman, but who has been forced to identify himself as a man. Political tensions increase as some on Hara struggle against the constraints posed by these limited sex roles.

In these and her other books Scott, more than almost any science fiction writer, combines high-tech thriller plots with characterizations and exploration of social and cultural norms. Her worlds are ones where social conflict occurs - conflict that's not just people fighting strange insect-like aliens, but people fighting for their rights as workers, women and gays. Scott shows us what our world might become. She shows us too the importance of struggle in making our world a hospitable place for all of us.

Chris Riddiough, a self-confessed Sci-Fi junkie, is DSA's Acting National Director.

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Cultivating the Fragile Flower of Democracy

BY BOGDAN DENITCH

The Institute for Transition to Democracy (ToD) is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which addresses the causes and consequences of ethnic conflicts and wars. ToD brings together people from the states which have emerged from the former Yugoslavia to build civic and popular organizations and initiatives to promote democratic pluralism, ethnic tolerance, peace and freedom in the region.

ToD is unique in that it is active among all groups: Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, SR Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo and Vojvodina), Macedonia and Slovenia. It is a multi-issue organization that links democracy to social justice. In addition to conflict resolution and reconciliation it attempts to spread a political culture of democracy and social justice by helping democratic trade unions, women's organizations, student groups, and alternative media.

ToD is unique in that it is active among all groups: Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, SR Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo and Vojvodina), Macedonia and Slovenia.

ToD has been bringing activists together since 1991. Participants from NGOs, non-nationalist parties and unions have gathered across hostile new frontiers in conferences in Vojvodina, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. An annual Summer

School in Croatia began in 1993. The 1997 Summer School brought together 147 participants from 26 NGOs, trade unions and parties. Of these, 128 were from the former Yugoslavia; others came from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Albania, the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, France, United Kingdom and the U.S. More than half the participants were women and half were young. ToD members have been active in creating independent trade union schools in Yugoslavia and Bosnia and working with unions in Croatia. ToD runs public forums and a substantive newsletter in English. Twenty-four issues have been published thus far.

Over the years ToD has received funds from the Olof Palme Internal Center in Stockholm, The Michael Harrington Centers in London and New York, the Renner, Ebert, Jean Juarez Foundations in Austria, Germany and France, the Open Society Foundation and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation.

Contributions to ToD are urgently needed. Increasing violence and repression in Kosovo by the Milosevic regime threaten the continuation of the Yugoslav wars of secession. ToD's work is more critical than ever. Your contribution can make a difference. Checks

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should be made out to "The Institute for Transition to Democracy (ToD)" and send it to ToD c/o Bogdan Denitch, 47 St. Mark's Place, New York, NY 10003.

ToD is incorporated in Washington DC as a non-profit organization with a pending application for 501(c)(3) status. It has branches in Sarajevo and Kosovo. ToD also cooperates with groups in Mexico and Eastern Europe which pursue similar aims. It is directed by Bogdan Denitch, a Professor emeritus at City University of New York and a long time activist in civil rights, trade union and social justice causes, and a honorary Chair of Democratic Socialists of America.

Myths/continued from page 2

imagining pallid, a problem I have with many retellings. However, by the time I finished all the versions in the book, I was impressed by the way each one added layers of interpretation to the familiar.

"Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth: there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account," Warner claims. Reading of Demeter and Persephone I could choose versions that brought up the terror of abduction and rape, the conflicts of leaving home and finding one's own power, the "mid-life crisis" of seeing a daughter leave home. As a socialist feminist I could take hope in a world blooming again after a seemingly endless winter.

The hunger that so many people feel for values, for stories that make sense of their lives in a world increasingly out of control, more specifically, out of their control, can be fed by myth. We on

the left can find empowering stories either in old versions, in new interpretations of old materials, or in re-fashioned stories.

Looking through *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* I saw that the editor, Jack Zipes, gave credit to socialist feminists for writing some of the best new versions. My personal favorite was the one in which Snow White and the dwarfs refuse to keep working in the mines for the evil queen. This story first appeared twenty-three years ago. Disney has not optioned it, but my daughters wanted to hear it again and again.

It was the longest winter until Demeter and Persephone were reunited. There's no telling what will end the barrenness of our own age. But as we wait, and act, we should, in Warner's words, seek to use "memory, imagination, and language to question, to remember, and to repair, to wish things well,

without rancor, always resisting the sweet seduction of despair."

Maxine Phillips is a member of the Democratic Left editorial board and an editor of Dissent.

Books Discussed in the Essay

Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England.

Ed., Jack Zipes.
Routledge, 1986.

The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time.

Ed., Christine Downing.
Shambhala, 1994.

Six Myths of Our Time: Little Angels, Little Monsters, Beautiful Beasts, and More.

By Marina Warner.
Vintage, 1995.

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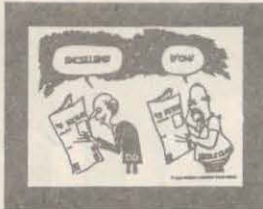
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"The vision we share teaches us:

- That power should be used not to maintain power and privilege, but to promote individual and communal growth and development, to teach and to heal, and not to do harm.
- That individually and collectively we must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, heal the sick, teach the young and care for the helpless.
- That spiritual renewal must come to whole societies as well as to individuals and families, that only in community can we find wholeness.
- That the three curses—the subjugation of men to exhausting toil, the subjugation of women to men, and the subjugation of the earth to human arrogance—are not our inevitable lot, but aspects of brokenness for which we seek wholeness, and can win it.
- That nations must beat their swords into plowshares and study war no more."

— Religion & Socialism Commission, DSA—

Religious Socialism is the longest continuous publication of any commission of the Democratic Socialists of America and is the only publication in the United States whose sole purpose is to retain the much needed insights of the religious within the socialist movement.

Fear of discovery and prosecution, fear of seeing a real doctor, fear of all the blood. I read this book and regretted that Jane did not yet exist when I needed her.

For the founders of Jane the condition of women in 1969 was unacceptable. Abortion was a right which women could decide to use. It was no one else's business. Once their service had evolved to the point at which they were doing the abortions themselves, they realized they could provide the service at a lower cost than was otherwise available in addition to controlling all aspects of counseling and aftercare. Along with their new skills came the empowerment and liberation attendant on taking control of one's life and body and a commitment to passing along this power and freedom to the women who came through the service. Abortion was a catalyst for criticizing the omnipotence of doctors. As one woman said, "If they're lying to us about how complex and dangerous abortion is, what else are they lying to us about?" Jane members were working against a system that objectified women as patients and alienated them from abortion as a life-determining experience. In Jane abortions were provided by other women in a situation in which none of the women was treated as an object.

Unfortunately, with the right-wing threats to abortion and the corresponding severe cutbacks to abortion services and training currently going on, the realities described in this book are a mere law or Supreme Court decision away.

If anything, the book suffers from the author's ambiguity about her own experience in Jane. On the one hand, she chronicles the 4 years of the service's existence in minute detail. On the other, the detail she chronicles focuses more on the organizational difficulties inherent in an outwardly consensus-based organization that by virtue of the re-

DIVAS TO THE DANCE FLOOR ... PLEASE!

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DSA seeks an experienced and committed activist to serve as Field Coordinator for the DSA Youth Section, working out of the DSA National Office in New York City. Responsibilities include:

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- Developing activist program, including educational and training materials for activists in conjunction with YS Coordinating Committee and DSA National Office.
- Planning national conferences and other events (generally two or three a year).
- Serving as a DSA representative and liaison to other progressive organizations.
- Working with DSA staff, the DSA National Political Committee, and the Youth Section Coordinating Committee to integrate the work of the Youth Section with the rest of the organization.
- Helping develop organizing and leadership skills among YS activists.

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Applicants should submit a 1-2 page cover letter and résumé (attn: Kevin Pranis) by May 1, 1998. For more information, please contact Kevin at the National Office.

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alities of its existence outside the law had to have a hierarchical leadership structure as far as decision making and function. Granted, these are fairly universal problems facing any democratically inclined organization, not just feminist groups of the 60s and 70s.

These criticisms do not detract from the essential service provided

by this work. It should be required reading for anyone interested in the early history of the abortion movement and is a must for anyone who did not live through the dark days before *Roe v. Wade*.

Judith Nedrow is a member of DC/NOVA/MD DSA and a long-time feminist activist.

Essential Reading

BY TRACIE McMILLAN

Robin D.G. Kelley is a man to be reckoned with. A tenured professor in history and Africana studies well before the age of 40, he has earned a name for himself by defending and analyzing African-American culture with wit, skill, intellect, and compassion. And, in case that isn't impressive enough, his new book is a work of inspiration and insight rolled into one.

Kelley's *Yo' Mama's Dysfunktional!* begins with an analysis of scholarship on black urban culture, particularly that which touts it as inherently revolutionary. Arguing that black urban culture is neither monolithic nor solely about struggle, Kelley places emphasis on the aesthetic pleasure derived from creating culture. Building on that, he examines attempts by urban youth to turn "play into pay," utilizing their culture as a means of supporting themselves in an era when global capitalism is tearing jobs from their cities.

Moving away from the cultural, Kelley takes to task neo-conservatives and others who proclaim self-help as the key to black empowerment. Skillfully arguing that "opposing strong government support in favor of some romantic notion of self-reliance is tantamount to relinquishing our citizenship," Kelley reclaims the state and the notion of entitlement as essential to the Left.

Kelley goes on to argue against the all-too-familiar assertion that the Left needs to "get back to class." He contends that identity politics and multi-culturalism are integral to creating a strong class movement by virtue of the fact that, to quote from a recent reading in New York, the "working class is not Archie Bunker." Kelley argues with crystal clarity that the best hope for a strong class-conscious movement lies in strategies which recognize the multi-racial/ethnic/gender character of the working class, not in 'transcending' race and gender in favor of 'uni-

versalist' class arguments. Indeed, this Enlightenment model, as Kelley shows, emerges from a history of imperialism and racism. All this talk is not without its basis in reality either, as Kelley shows by giving solid examples of praxis, chronicling the work of Justice for Janitors, UNITE, and the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union.

That said, Kelley recognizes the pitfalls involved in focusing narrowly on identity politics. He's not arguing for women's struggles to be limited to women, racial struggles to be confined to people of color, or splitting the Left into compartmentalized struggles; what he's advocating is a clear yet complex understanding of the nature of class today. In all honesty, the chapter of *Yo' Mama* which deals with this (if not the whole book) should be required reading for anyone interested

Yo' Mama's Dysfunktional!

by Robin Kelley. Beacon,
1997. 220 pp.

in organizing for economic and social justice in a way which accepts the complexities which structure our lives and our attempts to fight for a better society.

Many things about this book warrant praise, but perhaps the most impressive is Kelley's ability to make complex concepts and ideas intelligible without oversimplifying them or glossing over their nuances. Kelley writes with a wit, intelligence, passion, and insight that you'll be hard-pressed to find anywhere else. Most importantly, he's inspirational and energizing, with a writing style that engages as much as it informs. A quick read for an academic book (it took me 6 hours), *Yo' Mama* is certainly worth the time and energy it might divert from your regular activities.

Tracie McMillan is active in DSA's Youth Section. We don't know when, or where, she sleeps.

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Sometimes it takes awhile for rhetoric to catch up with reality. A good example of this is the rise of Tony Blair and "new labor" in the U.K. I hear many people in and out of DSA referring to Blair's rhetoric about social liberalism, and his rejection of socialism, as an abrupt "turn" to the center. I believe this assessment is wrong. Blair has simply brought labor-party rhetoric in line with labor-party reality. Yes, Labor has a socialist tradition; it has many members who call themselves socialists; it has an active left-wing, including at least one-third of its MPs. But, the Labor Party is not a "left" party. It is a center-left formation, and has been for over forty years. There have been repeated attempts by various "lefts" within Labor to "radicalize" the program and practice of the party. Every one of these has been unsuccessful, particularly at the polls. The "labor" that wins elections does so turning toward the center. This was true thirty years ago; it is certainly true today.

Recognizing this reality puts those of us who are of the left in a peculiar situation. We don't like what is happening. But, it doesn't do any good going into denial and day dreaming about a mass electoral party that gains a majority in Parliament on a left program. For, the British situation is hardly unique. Throughout Western Europe, the major social democratic and socialist parties are, for the most part, center-left formations and, with a few exceptions, in center-left governments with parties to their right. What we would call a left program—anti-corporate, state interventionist, and social justice oriented—is supported by no more than 20-25 percent of the electorate in any European country. And, it's not even the case that having a "genuine" left party necessarily disciplines other

parties in a radical direction. For every French situation, in which the Communist Party has pressured the present government on issues like unemployment, there is an Italian situation, in which the Olive Tree Coalition has held the line on a left pull from the Refounding Communists.

So, it is no mere rhetorical flourish when Tony Blair meets with Bill

Blair's center-left strategy will fail.

Clinton and calls for the forging of new global center-left movement to discuss a common approach to political and economic problems. "The purpose is to craft and define center-left philosophy for the world of today. . . . I want to start with the ideology that links labor and the Democrats." For Blair, it is essential that the world's center-left parties put themselves at the forefront of managing social change in the global economy. "The old left resisted that change. The new right did not want to manage it. We have to manage that change to produce social solidarity and prosperity."

You may be startled to see Blair refer to the Democratic Party as a center-left formation, with the implicit assumption that it plays the same role in U.S. politics that social-democratic and socialist parties play in Europe. Well, as much as we don't want to hear it, he's mostly on the mark. Moreover, these European parties, with a few exceptions, are slowly transforming into Democratic-type parties. "New Labor and New Democrats" are becoming the hegemonic political model.

What, then, is the appropriate

left response? That all depends on what our assessment is of Tony Blair's challenge. He says that center-left parties should manage social change in the global economy to produce social solidarity and prosperity. He doesn't just mean prosperity for only the top 20 percent. He means what Michael Harrington called mass prosperity—the kind of majoritarian prosperity achieved in the golden years of post-war capitalism, through Keynesian economic management and welfare state expansion in the nation-states of Western Europe and North America. If you believe that a type of global Keynesianism that can generate a mass prosperity on a global scale is really possible, then it is incumbent on the left to support his center-left strategy. But, if you look at the facts and see, like I do, that global capitalism has a strong tendency to generate massive inequalities of wealth and income and that countervailing, Keynesian-type regulation of the transnationals is impossible short of an effective world government (which is not in my crystal ball!), then Blair's center-left strategy will fail. So, a left alternative must be created . . . not because we are nostalgic for the good old days of "pure" socialist rhetoric, but because we insist on living in the truth. In the long-run, economic reality will run away from Blair's rhetoric. I wish it were otherwise, but the tendency of today's global capitalism is more toward the "free-market" capitalism of the Communist Manifesto than the "managed" capitalism of the Affluent Society.

So, what exactly is the nature of this Left alternative? The DSA Political Perspective Document does a good job of laying it out. And in my next column, I will condense it into an 800-word sound-bite.

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