



Vale, Bob Young

Gary Werskey

I've written elsewhere about Bob Young's theoretical contributions to science studies and politics during the 1970s.¹ Bob was the radical science movement's Bernal, but -- in spite of themselves -- they were both Cambridge men. Otherwise I don't feel qualified to comment on Bob's work and legacy either before or after that turbulent decade.

What I can acknowledge is the inspiration as well as the upset that his journey from Cambridge donhood to becoming an independent Marxist scholar and agitator aroused in those around him. There is no question that Bob was better at burning rather than building bridges to the scholarly community that he so precipitately abandoned. Encounters with Bob could be alternately bracing and bruising, occasionally both. Sometimes, sadly, they could lead to a permanent rupture with peers, students, and activists with whom he had worked closely for many years. In later life Bob brooded over these breaks and the shadow that he thought they cast over his legacy as a scholar.

I first encountered Bob 50 years ago when I was happily ensconced with Barry Barnes and David Bloor in the Science Studies Unit. Until Bob turned up in Edinburgh in early 1971 to present his paper on 'Evolutionary Biology and Ideology: Then and Now',² I was maintaining a comfortable equilibrium as a participant in both the intellectual ferment of my discipline and the politics of the anti-war movement. By the end of his seminar, this hulking figure, with his John Wayne-like accent, massive erudition, and evangelical conversion to the far Left, had succeeded in putting me well outside my comfort zone. While Barry Barnes was repelled by Bob's performance, I found his call to action utterly persuasive. Two years later I found myself in academic limbo as I joined Bob in London to help launch the *Radical Science Journal*. Meanwhile the SSU had found in Steve Shapin more than adequate recompense for my departure.

Working with Bob on the *RSJ* was as exhilarating as it was exhausting. Already a perpetually ravenous intellectual omnivore, he further challenged us to re-cast our world-view with a critical reading of Marx and labour process theory while engaging with the demands of a prefigurative political lifestyle that stretched our personal relationships both inside and outside the collective. Without Les Levidow's tireless support and enduring loyalty, the whole enterprise would have gone off the rails well before it was recast in the following decade into the more durable forms of *Science as Culture* and Free Association Books. The collateral damage for Bob, me, and many others were periods of political and personal burn-out.

¹ Gary Werskey, 'The Marxist Critique of Capitalist Science: A History in Three Movements?', *Science as Culture*, v. 16, no. 4 (December 2007), esp. 433-440.

² Robert M. Young, 'Evolutionary Biology and Ideology: Then and Now', *Science Studies*, v. 1, no. 2, 177-206.

Since that time Bob had cause to doubt whether his own work and that of those who travelled with him would have any kind of enduring influence on our understanding of science either historically or politically. He would have been heartened by today's proceedings – and some of his obituaries – but might also have shot back that 'it took you long enough!'. I doubt he went gently into that good night. Vale, Bob.

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