LIVING MARXISM

WHY IS BRITISH POLITICS SO BORING?

May 1991• No31• £1.80

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The Ribble Valley effect

'The Ribble Valley effect' says it all about British politics in the run-up to the next general election. It was a by-election for our times, a dishwater-dull contest between bloodless machine politicians, each of them trying to appear more uncontroversial and closer to the centre than the others. Three parties with less than one decent idea or interesting policy among them. An electorate stirred into a protest vote by their opposition to the poll tax, but not voting *for* anything in particular. Welcome to the politics of the mind-numbing nineties.

It doesn't have to be that way. In this month's *Living Marxism*, we examine what's behind the present impasse in British political life, from the crisis of Tory ideology to the disintegration of the alternatives. Our survey leaves a powerful impression of a political system which has long since come to the end of its useful life. The need for a new political current has never been more obvious.

In the months between now and the general election, *Living Marxism* will be redoubling its efforts to develop a new generation of anti-capitalist ideas, and to put the politics of working class struggle at the centre of things. It's the first step towards ridding the land of the Ribble Valley effect. Keep in touch, and you might even stay awake through the election campaign.

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LIVING MARXISM

Monthly review of the Revolutionary Communist Party

Telephone: (071) 375 1702

Subscription rates: Britain and Northern Ireland £15 • Europe (airmail) £24 • Outside Europe (airmail) £33 • Overseas (surface mail) £19 • (Institutions add £7.50) • Make cheques payable to Junius Publications Ltd and send to Junius Publications Ltd, BCM JPLTD, London WC1N 3XX; Fax: (071) 377 0346 • Distributed by Comag Magazine Marketing, Tavistock Road, West Drayton, Middlesex UB7 7QE. Phone: West Drayton (0895) 444 055; Fax: (0895) 445 255; Telex: 881 3787 • Typeset by Junius Publications (TU)

• Printed by Russell Press (TU), Nottingham • ISSN 0955-2448 May 1991. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome, but can only be returned if an SAE is enclosed

editorial

The Walter Mitty Tendency and the poll tax

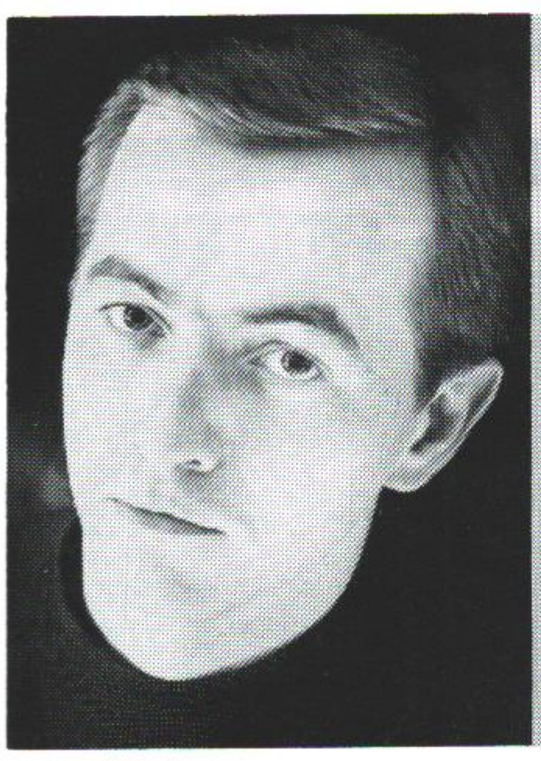
Who really sank the poll tax? It certainly wasn't socialism, striking council workers, the All-Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation, or any organised campaign of mass non-payment. Those left-wing journalists and groups who believe that it was are living in a fantasy land.

It is the same fantasy land in which *Militant* saw Margaret Thatcher brought down by a 'subterranean revolt in the factories, on the estates, in embittered working class communities the length and breadth of the country', rather than by Michael Heseltine. The same fantasy land where *Socialist Worker* can now claim that the government's budget reforms, like putting a whole pound on child benefit, are proof that a 'popular revolt against Thatcher's social policies' has forced John Major to turn left and adopt the programme of social democracy.

The left in Britain has long since ceased to command much public respect. If it continues along its present line of self-delusion about mass movements and popular revolts, it is in danger of becoming completely ridiculous. Indeed the handful of activists who danced somewhat self-consciously in front of the television cameras on budget day, to celebrate the 'victory' of a 2.5 per cent rise in VAT, have already achieved that distinction.

The poll tax has unquestionably become a fiasco from the Tories' point of view. The ongoing cock-up over replacing it demonstrates that the Conservatives are nowhere near recovering from the political crisis which led to Thatcher's fall last November. But the phasing out of the poll tax is not a victory for the left, any more than the ascendancy of Mr 'If-it's-not-hurting-it's-not-working' Major to the premiership was a step forward for the working class (some twinkle-toed socialists danced for the cameras on that day, too).

Away from fantasy land, the facts make a nonsense of the notion that the left has made any advances through its campaign around the poll tax and local government. While the Tories were announcing the poll tax reform, the Labour Party leadership was casually suspending left-wing councillors in Lambeth and Liverpool for their opposition to the tax, and giving the same treatment to Steve Nally, a spokesman for the Militant-led All-Britain



editor
mick hume

Anti-Poll Tax Federation. There was little sign of the mass movement against the poll tax rallying to their defence and staging a popular revolt against Neil Kinnock. Indeed the weakness and isolation of the left meant that most of the movement was in the other direction, as when Lambeth's suspended 'hard left' council leader Joan Twelves promised the Labour leader that she would now obey the law and push through more spending cuts. Revolting perhaps, but 'popular'?

The left-wing newspaper rhetoric about how 'we've sunk the Tory flagship' cannot explain away the fact that the success of the Tory crusade against local government spending is sinking the left's own flagship councils. The local authorities most prominently associated with the Labour left over recent years are now among those being forced to impose the biggest cuts in jobs and services. By March of this year, for instance, Lambeth council was threatening 600 job losses, Haringey 1200 and Liverpool a thousand. In Liverpool during the eighties, the Militant-run city council issued ritual warnings that the Tory government's spending restrictions would lead to redundancies. The irony is that now, while Militant is claiming that the Tories have been 'brought to their knees', its supporters have lost control of Liverpool and council workers are really losing their jobs.

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Perhaps those on the left who claim that their anti-poll tax campaign made such an impact could explain how, over the past year, while opposition to the tax in the opinion polls remained steady at around 75 per cent, the Tories *improved* their national standing and overcame a 10-point Labour lead? Or how, at a time when the government is supposed to have been under tremendous pressure from the working class over the poll tax, it could preside over soaring unemployment and widespread cash pay cuts without facing any serious opposition?

It is impossible to imagine a situation in which thousands of working people could take an active part in a mass movement against the poll tax, yet decide to do nothing about other little issues like the threat to their jobs and living standards. The reality is that the only 'mass movement' among working class people today is the one from the workplace to the dole office.

The left's mass non-payment campaign could not succeed because it did not exist. A lot of people have not paid all of their poll tax. But few of them have been engaged in an active political protest. They are simply too hard-up to pay, and the inefficiency of the system has given them some scope to delay doing so. This has caused technical problems for the authorities. But it has nothing to do with politics. As was argued in *Living Marxism* back in August 1990, 'to claim that they are part of a mass campaign against the poll tax is like describing those in arrears with their mortgage payments as organised protesters making a stand against the government's high interest rates policy'.

The Tory government has decided to phase out the poll tax, not because of pressure from workers or the left, but because of discontent among its own supporters who have not reaped the benefits they were promised from the tax. The poll tax certainly angered a lot of working class people. But at every stage, the opposition to it has been shaped by moderate middle class forces. The pressure to which the Tories felt the need to respond came from dissenters within their own constituency.

Two of the key moments in the death march of the poll tax were the by-election defeats which the Tories suffered in the previously safe seats of Eastbourne and Ribble Valley, both of them clearly protest votes against the poll tax rather than the Tory Party itself. (Typically, *Socialist Worker* failed to mention either by-election in its potted 'History of revolt' in March, choosing instead to inflate the importance of a few industrial disputes among local authority workers last summer, which didn't exactly shake the Thatcher government.)

After the government announced the phase-out, the terms of the Tory debate about what to replace the poll tax with made it obvious who they were trying to placate. There was no discussion about alleviating the impoverishment of working class families; indeed the government insisted that the replacement would have a poll tax element. Most concern centred on how to ensure that the new property tax element of local government finance did not hit the owners of high value houses in the home counties too hard. Whatever the final outcome of the reforms, the working class can expect to gain nothing from these Tory attempts to fiddle the poll tax.

Over the past year in *Living Marxism* we have insisted that, while we opposed the poll tax as an anti-democratic and anti-working class measure, prioritising a campaign against it would not prove productive for the anti-capitalist left. The current political climate in Britain is overwhelmingly conservative, and (as we examine in detail in this month's issue) there is no working class opposition movement. In the context of the crisis of working class politics, an issue like the poll tax, which attracted criticism from all sections of society, was bound to be dominated by moderate and middle class opinion. So it proved.

Many on the left concentrated their efforts on the poll tax campaign precisely because it allied them with 'respectable' members of society and created the illusion of overcoming their isolation. Some, like Militant, went out of their way to condemn the youth who stood up to the riot police after last year's big anti-poll tax march, because they feared that the fighting might frighten off Tory opponents of the poll tax. If these left-wing groups feel the need of a middle class big brother to hold their hand in the dark, fair enough. But they fool nobody except themselves when they try to claim their adopted relative's success in reforming the poll tax as their own, or pretend that working class people have cause to celebrate.

It is time for all the blather about mass movements and popular revolts to stop

It is time for all the blather about mass movements and popular revolts to stop. We need to face up to the fact that all of the old working class traditions and movements are finished, and start again from where we are. The irony is that if we adopt a realistic approach to what is possible today, the prospects for making some headway are not bad.

The poll tax debacle and the dull pragmatism of the Major government symbolise a loss of direction by the Tories and a wider crisis of ruling class politics. In these circumstances there are considerable opportunities for us to take a first step towards creating a new anti-capitalist current in British politics, by taking up the issues which best expose the truth about their corrupt system, and arming a minority with an understanding of the possibility and desirability of social change. But that elementary task cannot be achieved by a left which continues to live in a fantasy land, where you can take a short-cut to a mass movement by prioritising the poll tax over a less popular (but more important) issue like opposing the Gulf War.

The Tories have lost their mask of invincibility and exhausted their programme, and now stand exposed as ideological bankrupts. The problem is that they can still sound convincing compared to the great pretenders of the mass anti-poll tax campaign and the Walter Mitty Tendency.

letters

We welcome readers' views and criticisms.
Please keep your letters as short as possible and send them to The Editor, *Living Marxism*, BM RCP, London WC1N 3XX, or fax them on (071) 377 0346

Whose war crimes?

Might I take the opportunity to congratulate Kenan Malik for an excellent article 'Atrocities and acts of war' (April). However, if I might make one criticism it is that the article failed to expand on the subject of war crimes in general. Admittedly this was not the point of the article but there is, I believe, every need to enhance the public's awareness of the 'war crimes syndrome' present in this country.

Firstly, we should examine our own not too pleasant past; the second Opium War in China ended with Peking being razed to the ground and it was we ourselves, or rather our political masters, who introduced the first concentration camps interning many thousands of Boer men, with a great many of these dying through malnutrition and disease. In India, our political masters ordered troops to fire indiscriminately from point-blank range at Amritsar in 1919, and again many more were butchered in the Malabar risings of 1921-22. During the Second World War the city of Dresden was bombed killing some 135 000 innocent civilians and refugees, history's deadliest-ever bombing raid, worse even than the fire-bombing of Tokyo and the atomic bomb dropped at Hiroshima.

Secondly, we must not forget the propaganda uses of war crime fabrication on the passive masses. The 'human soap' and 'baby-eating Hun' stories of World War One, stories procreated in order that the public might give up their lives in the cause of humanity, stories later proven and admitted to have been falsified. Such stories sound all too similar to the 'snatching of incubator babies' and the 'brutal raping of *Western* air hostesses' fabrications of the Gulf War.

Now, and if factual rightly so, we hear criticism of the Iraqi use of helicopters against the fleeing Kurds, which we would all agree to be abhorrent, but the very people telling us these stories are those which advocated the B52s bombing innocent civilians in Baghdad, the attacks on retreating Iraqi troops and the dropping of napalm on Iraqi troops and installations. The hypocrisy of the capitalist West will continue to ensure the enslavement of the peoples of all nations until we challenge every aspect of their fabricated propaganda. We should not be reticent where such issues are concerned.

Paul Cox *Leeds*

Hands off CND

Mike Freeman's feeble attempt to justify the RCP's unsuccessful anti-war campaign in the article 'CND's alternative imperialism' (March) requires an answer. It would clearly suit the Hands Off the Middle East Committee if the rest of the anti-war movement were a bunch of crypto-imperialists as he tries to suggest. But Mr Freeman, in an effort to prove this, has quite distorted the truth about the peace movement in its newest phase.

While there is undoubtedly a pro-British and right-wing element in the peace movement, the coalition against the US-British war in the Gulf cannot truthfully be characterised as 'alternative imperialism'. Anybody who was at the March 2 rally in Trafalgar Square can testify that Iraqis, Palestinians, Labour MPs and American dissidents spoke out against the US-UK imperialist axis. It is a gross oversimplification to say that all these groups really support Neil Kinnock and the government. Isn't there something deeply patronising to suggest that apart from the RCP all other anti-war forces are merely slaves to the dictates of their country's ruling class, be it British, French or German?

I would agree that CND has traditionally been very narrow in its outlook, failing to challenge the role of militarism within Western imperialism. But selective quotes and cases of those who have deserted their original anti-war stance doesn't prove that the entire anti-war movement is in the hands of the Western establishment or backing Western intervention in the Gulf.

Mr Freeman's analysis of modern imperialism's drive to war is basically correct, but his assassination of the anti-war movement is woefully short of the truth. Most pitiful is his attempt to show that the turnout on anti-war demonstrations can be used as evidence of the movement's failure. Where does the Hands Off the Middle East Committee succeed by this criteria?

Do note that a large minority of the anti-war coalition have consistently opposed sanctions and called for the total withdrawal of Western forces from the region. The wide spectrum of politics in the anti-war movement is surely inevitable, which means anti-imperialists and liberal imperialists get thrown together. Perhaps you might consider the difficulty of rallying people to support Saddam Hussein, because under him, Iraq was an ally of imperialism right up until 2 August 1990.

J Godfrey

Anti-Semitism in the East

I find myself considerably confused by Mark Dalewicz's letter (March). While I agree that anti-Semitism in Russia was not a feature unique to the Gorbachev era, and that Trotsky was a Jew, I fail to see how Lenin 'spouting' comments like: 'Why is it that the only intelligent Russians are Jews?' reveals an anti-Semitic streak in him. It might also be noted that the Russian Revolution ended much of the terrible persecution of Jews that had occurred in Tsarist Russia.

Furthermore, Dalewicz states that the 'racist and loony-toon elements of Stalinist countries are now able to voice their bile'. What does this mean? An objective criticism of Stalinist Russia? I think not. Besides, I have not noticed a great deal of anything from the Eastern bloc being voiced in the Western media, but rather the other way around.

To look on the positive side, the circulation of *Living Marxism* among members of the Conservative Students Association must be a

heartening development. Given the ideological clash involved it is perhaps understandable that Dalewicz should make such an elementary confusion between Marxism and Stalinism. Maybe he would like to take out a subscription?
Chae Usher *London*

Erudite and highly specialised

Gary Banham's defence of Jacques Derrida (letters, April) against James Heartfield's review ('Vive la differance (sic)?', March) is misconceived. Gary is keen to differentiate Jacques Derrida, the French deconstructionist, Martin Heidegger, the German existentialist, and Kate Soper the British New Leftist—and accuses Heartfield of lumping them all together. But surely the thing to do is to understand what, if any, relationships exist between their work.

Since Derrida has never made a secret of his debt to Heidegger I think the question of whether he 'built upon' (Heartfield) or 'distanced himself from' (Banham) the German philosopher is just semantics. Suffice to say that Heidegger's interest in the concrete expression found in primitive language suggested to Derrida a way out of the linguistic obsessions of structuralism.

As to Kate Soper's relation to Derrida, we can say that her discussion of *difference feminism* is inconceivable without Derrida's emphasis on the virtues of difference. More importantly, feminism, of which Soper is representative, is a staging-post in the transition from traditional Enlightenment universals—equal rights and so on—to the celebration of the particular in contemporary social theory, of which Derrida is representative. This also is a debt that Derrida has no qualms about: he considers his own critique of *logocentrism* (organised around the logos, or reason) and the feminist critique of *phallocentrism* (organised around the phallus, or male principle) to be parallel projects, whose common grounds he celebrates in the term *phallogocentrism*.

We know that Kate Soper rejects the particularising consequences of the pursuit of the sectional project of feminism, as we know that Derrida rejects the charge of relativism, but then they would do, wouldn't they?

Finally, Gary warns us off the 'erudite and highly specialised affair' of Derrida's critique of *logocentrism*. Isn't this just the 'traditional certainty' of cloistered academia, whose pearls are too special to be understood by us swine? Let us be the judge of how erudite Derrida is, Gary.
Mark Wallis *Stevenage*

Glib on gay rights

For Don Milligan to conclude his article on gays and the law with the 'simple' call for equality ('Stormin' Norman and gay sex', April) not so much misses the point as runs from it. By glibly calling for the abolition of discriminatory laws, he not only fails to elaborate on what sort of 'combative approach' we should adopt, but also echoes the liberalistic sentiments in favour of legislation which can be found in varying degrees in every bourgeois parliamentary party.

I'm reassured that the tactics of the gay rights brigade leave him 'nonplussed' but he should be critical not simply because they are merely legalistic and defensive but because they are fundamentally wrong.

Should not this article have emphasised that the basic outlook of the sexual rights lobby leaves lesbians and gays ill-equipped to challenge anything more than the most superficial terms of their oppression? Might I suggest the 'combative approach' we seek is one which puts paid to the politics of identity. Modish and defensive, this brand of reformism celebrates fragmentation, mythologises gay 'community' and mirrors the outlook of the state by categorising them by their sexual practices.

The potential for forging anti-state sentiment among lesbians and gays into something more palpable and challenging is enormous. This will not occur if *Living Marxism* does not expose the implicit failings of gay politics. The first step is to challenge present lesbian and gay sentiments which celebrate the bogus politics of identity in hostility to the politics of class.
Noel Parting *Derbyshire*

Retrospective boring old fart syndrome

At a time when the current music scene is increasingly dry of innovation and compact disc-conservative in outlook, it's unfortunate to see *Living Marxism* following the same trend. Refer to the article by Jimmy Simpson ('Only a fad, dad?', March). He asked if jazz dance was taking off or just the music industry's latest fashion, but instead of an answer we got a eulogy to James Brown and Miles Davis—two great artists, but as Miles would say, 'so what?'.

It's unfortunate that having taken up the fashion pundits JS makes the same mistakes by assuming that jazz dance is something new. It isn't. Jazz dance has roots back in the late seventies when many capable players like Donald Bird, Roy Ayres, Tania Maria and Ronnie Laws straddled jazz improvisation with upfront funky dance beats. Even siblings like Gilles Peterson have been around since the early eighties.

What is new in the 1990s is the realisation that Britain has a sizeable crop of jazz musos that for the first time can hold their own stateside. And the desire for experimentation typified by jazz/rap fusion and allied to advances in sound technology (eg, sampling) is creating a new jazz for the nineties that threatens the monolithic old jazz establishment and in a minor way rekindles the pioneering spirit and controversy that bebop engendered in the forties and fifties. So come on *LM*, let's have less of the retrospective boring old fart syndrome and a bit more support for what's happening musically in the 1990s.
The Rebop Collective *London*

Eton rifles

After Mavis Wilton's sighting of *Living Marxism* in the Coronation Street shop (letters, March), it seems that Marxist 'product placement' has reached Channel 4. In their recent programme about Eton, one sixth form rebel was seen blatantly cribbing his essays from the October issue. Surely we must disown this cheating?
Eagle Eye *Croydon*

Midnight in the Century

Frank Richards writes: 'For the first time this century, capitalism faces neither intellectual nor practical alternatives' ('Midnight in the Century', December 1990). Not so! Green politics offers, in fact urges, alternatives; and in the light of what we are now doing to the planet, actually gives the *only* practical alternative to capitalism.

The one intellectual and practical criticism of Marxism is that in its original form it is out of date. Not because it has been tried and failed, because it has not been fairly tried, nor because there is no longer such a thing as the class struggle, because the class struggle is as alive today as in 1848, albeit in a different form. Where Marxism is out of date is in respect to ecology. Marx and Engels cannot be blamed for their false assumption that the planet's resources were infinite, nor for failing to understand the devastating damage humanity is now known to be doing to the biosphere of which we are part and on which we depend.

Whether production is in capitalist or proletarian hands, if you chuck five billion tonnes of carbon into the air every year you get a greenhouse effect; and it stands to oppress humanity rather more than the ideological infrastructure of the ruling class. What the battle against capitalism needs is an ecological perspective. You can hardly say this is not an intellectual alternative to capitalism: just look through any Green Party manifesto. It doesn't tinker with the system—it calls for a change of outlook more fundamental than any change from capitalist to communist economy.

Marx's ideas are more vital than ever today—because capital doesn't just oppress, it has also developed the power to cause environmental disasters Karl could only have had nightmares about. But Marxism must develop an ecological strain, or be out of touch with present reality. The traditional bulwark of communism, social ownership of the means of production, is inadequate. We must start seeing ourselves as *part* of the planet, not as owners or conquerors of it.
Spencer Fitz-Gibbon *Manchester Green Party*

The Birmingham Six are free, but...

The Irish are still in the frame

From left to right: Hugh Callaghan; Richard McIlkenny; Billy Power; Paddy Hill; and Johnny Walker (Gerry Hunter is not in the picture)

The release of the Birmingham Six is an occasion for celebration—and, says Kirsten Cale, for raising the wider issues of British injustice towards the Irish

The collapse of the case against the Birmingham Six has brought out some, though not all, of the truth. The very highest echelons of British society were implicated in the web of violence and corruption that surrounded the convictions. Home secretaries, top Labour and Tory politicians, and the highest judges in the land rubbed shoulders with bent coppers, discredited scientists, dodgy lawyers and thuggish prison screws. The prisoners were beaten to extract confessions, forensic tests were fixed, evidence forged and witnesses got at. And all to frame six Irishmen for bombings everyone knew they didn't carry out. The freedom for the Six and humiliation for the government and judiciary is something to celebrate.

Now that the initial euphoria has passed, however, it is worth taking stock of the overall impact of the case. The release of the Birmingham Six has not altered the climate of anti-Irish chauvinism in Britain today. If anything, these sentiments intensified after the court case. Many still believe that fancy legal footwork let six 'bombers' walk free on a technicality. In Birmingham pubs on the night of their release, plenty of people were willing to echo Lord Denning's remarks that if the Six had been hanged in the first place, they would have been forgotten and 'we' would have been spared all the fuss.

The fact that the release of the Six has been presented as a 'special case', divorced from the wider Irish question, means that the case has not seriously damaged the repressive machinery which was constructed after the Birmingham pub bombings to criminalise the Irish in Britain. The explosions which ripped through

Photo: Press Association

Birmingham's Mulberry Bush and Tavern in the Town pubs on 21 November 1974, killing 21, gave the Labour government the pretext to introduce draconian measures. It took Labour home secretary Roy Jenkins just 18 hours to rush the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) through parliament and into law. Under the terms of the PTA the IRA was banned and anybody 'reasonably suspected of terrorism' (in practice, anybody Irish) could be imprisoned and interrogated for up to a week without charge, and deported without evidence. The PTA became the British face of the Irish War.

Act of war

Prior to the introduction of the PTA, many Irish people in Britain were willing to express sympathy with the republican struggle for a united, independent Ireland. Indeed at the time of their arrest, most of the Birmingham Six were *en route* to Ireland to attend the funeral of James McDade, an IRA man killed by his own bomb in Coventry. The PTA was instrumental in driving such sentiments underground, by terrorising the entire Irish community. The act has provided the framework for branding as criminal any opposition to the Irish War within Britain.

Between November 1974 and December 1990, 6931 people were detained under the PTA 'in connection with Northern Ireland affairs', stamped as suspected terrorists by the British authorities. Only 214—three per cent—of these were charged with offences under the act. For the vast majority, it was simply an exercise in intimidation. In addition, 50 000 people each year are picked up at British ports and airports, interrogated for short periods and released in police trawling exercises under the provisions of the act.

Irish still branded

Two days after the release of the Birmingham Six, Kevin O'Donnell, an Irish student in London, was sentenced to nine months' youth service for possession of arms after police claims that he was an IRA gun-runner collapsed. As O'Donnell had already been detained for 10 months, he walked free. He was rearrested outside the courthouse by the anti-terrorist squad and deported back to Ireland under the PTA. The Six have been freed, but the repressive law which their case was originally used to justify remains in force as a threat to the Irish in Britain.

The British authorities have been seriously embarrassed by the way in which the Birmingham Six case turned the normally secret world of police and judicial dirty tricks into headline news. But they can take such an episode in their stride, as long as the criticism does not raise wider political questions. And most of the criticism which the legal system has attracted over the Birmingham case has studiously avoided raising any such thing.

This *is* British justice

The papers presented the conviction of the Six as a gross miscarriage of justice; even the right-wing *Times* and *Telegraph* went through the motions of criticising the malice of key policemen and judges on the case. Although this line of argument might sound like serious criticism, it in fact helps to take our eye off the ball. The truth is that the ordeal of the Birmingham Six was an inevitable consequence of the official British policy of terrorising the Irish. Their imprisonment was not a *miscarriage* of British justice, but a *manifestation* of the systematic injustice the system metes out to the Irish. The narrowly focused press criticisms of individual policemen and judges help to hide this fact behind clouds of debate on the abnormal character of the case itself.

Much of the criticism has been directed at Lord Lane, the judge who refused to free the Birmingham Six in 1987. There have been calls from some quarters for him to resign as lord chief justice. Lane has certainly had a long and inglorious career of helping to convict the innocent. In 1962, he was part of the prosecution that sent the innocent James Hanratty to the gallows; and in 1966 he acted for the police against Timothy Evans, hanged for the murder of his daughter, then posthumously pardoned. In 1987 Lane rejected the appeal of the Birmingham Six, and refused leave to Winston Silcott and his co-defendants to appeal against their convictions for the killing of PC Keith Blakelock on Broadwater Farm—convictions based upon evidence just as flimsy as that used to jail the Six.

Off the hook

Nobody with a sense of genuine justice would want to defend Lane. The problem is, however, that criticism directed against individual reactionaries like him lets the system itself off the hook, particularly when it ignores the distinct political motives behind the framing of six Irishmen for bombings in Britain. The most such criticism could lead to is an invitation to Lane to retire on a fat pension. The judiciary has already demonstrated its arrogant contempt for its critics over the Birmingham case. The presiding judges at the final appeal did not even consider it necessary to declare the Birmingham Six innocent of the charges they had been convicted of 16 years ago, much less apologise.

Still a cover-up

The reaction of the police also suggests that they expect to get away with their crimes of the past. The chief constable appointed to investigate the police officers who interrogated the Birmingham Six stated that he had found no evidence that the police had beaten them after their arrest. The evidence of witnesses who had seen policemen in a cell with alsatians while the naked Irishmen were forced to stand to attention; who had seen officers hit them repeatedly in the stomach and testicles; who had seen the police stage mock executions firing blanks at point-blank range—has all been quietly ignored. Meanwhile, the present West Midlands chief constable has said that he would not suspend the officers under investigation, and the Force has even had the gall to claim that the Six owe their freedom to 'good police work'. In the solid climate of anti-Irish opinion, the police can get away with a cover-up even after the release of the Birmingham Six.

Jubilation at the release of the Birmingham Six must be tempered by the recognition that the machinery which victimised them remains intact. The British system of justice is just a weapon in the state's colonial war against Irish nationalists. Irish communities are still criminalised by the PTA, while the victims of judicial frame-ups and police violence continue to rot in Britain's jails.

The propaganda war

The release of the Six should have been an ideal issue around which to expose the reality of the British state's injustice towards the Irish. Yet the strength of the consensus supporting criminalisation is such that the British authorities had some success in turning the heat back on to the Irish republican movement, by insisting that it was the IRA, rather than the Crown's legal system, which destroyed the six men's lives. That this ludicrous argument could be accepted as good coin is proof that, even after the collapse of the corrupt case against the Birmingham Six, the authorities are able to blame 'the bombers' for all of the tragic consequences of Britain's colonial war in Ireland.

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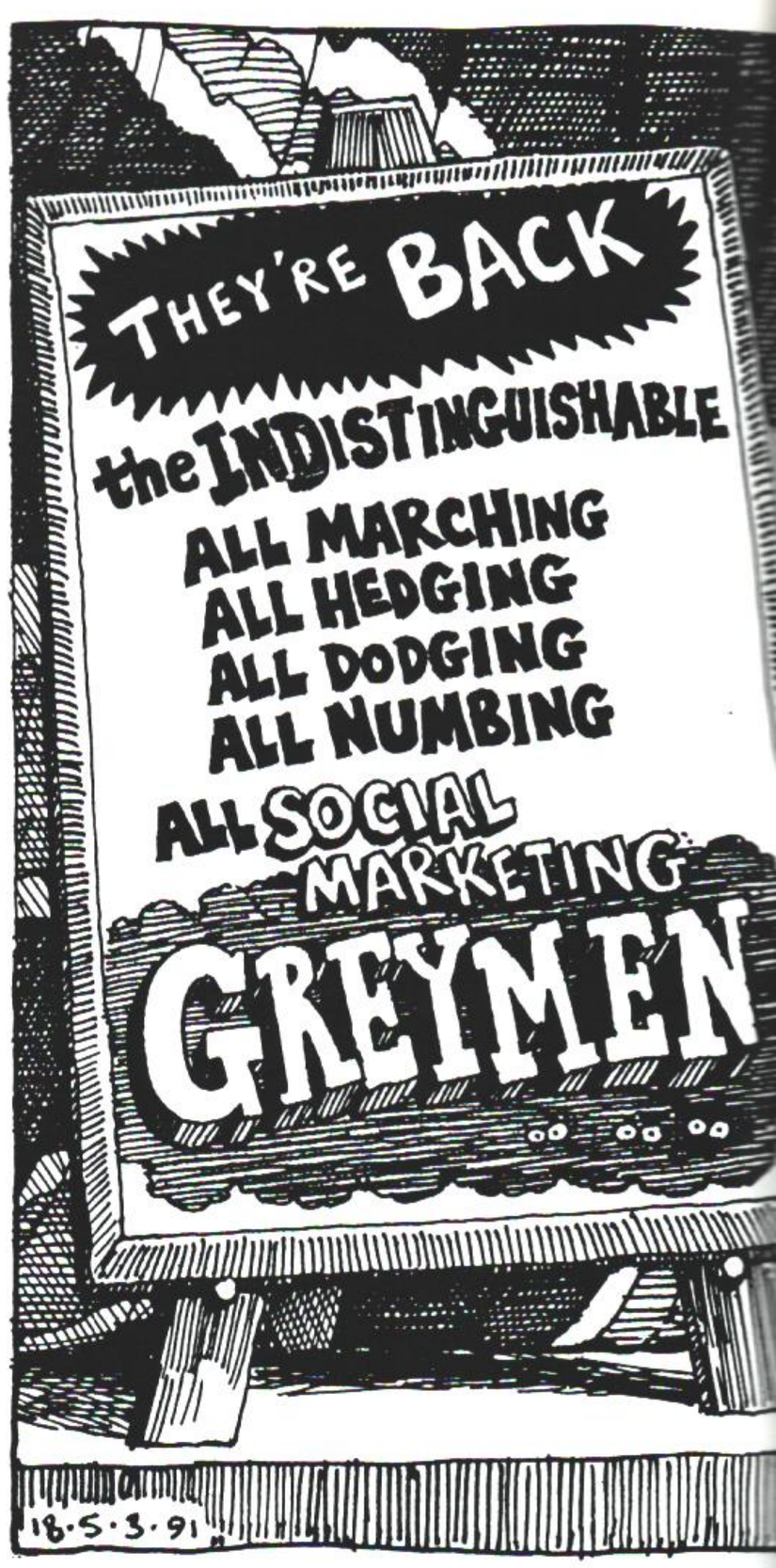


Why is British politics so boring?

At a moment sandwiched between the Gulf War and the general election, you might expect to find some excitement on the British political scene. Instead, things are as grey as John Major's suit. This is more than a problem of personalities. Major, Neil Kinnock and Paddy Ashdown are bores because their parties do not have one single inspiring idea or political cause to offer.

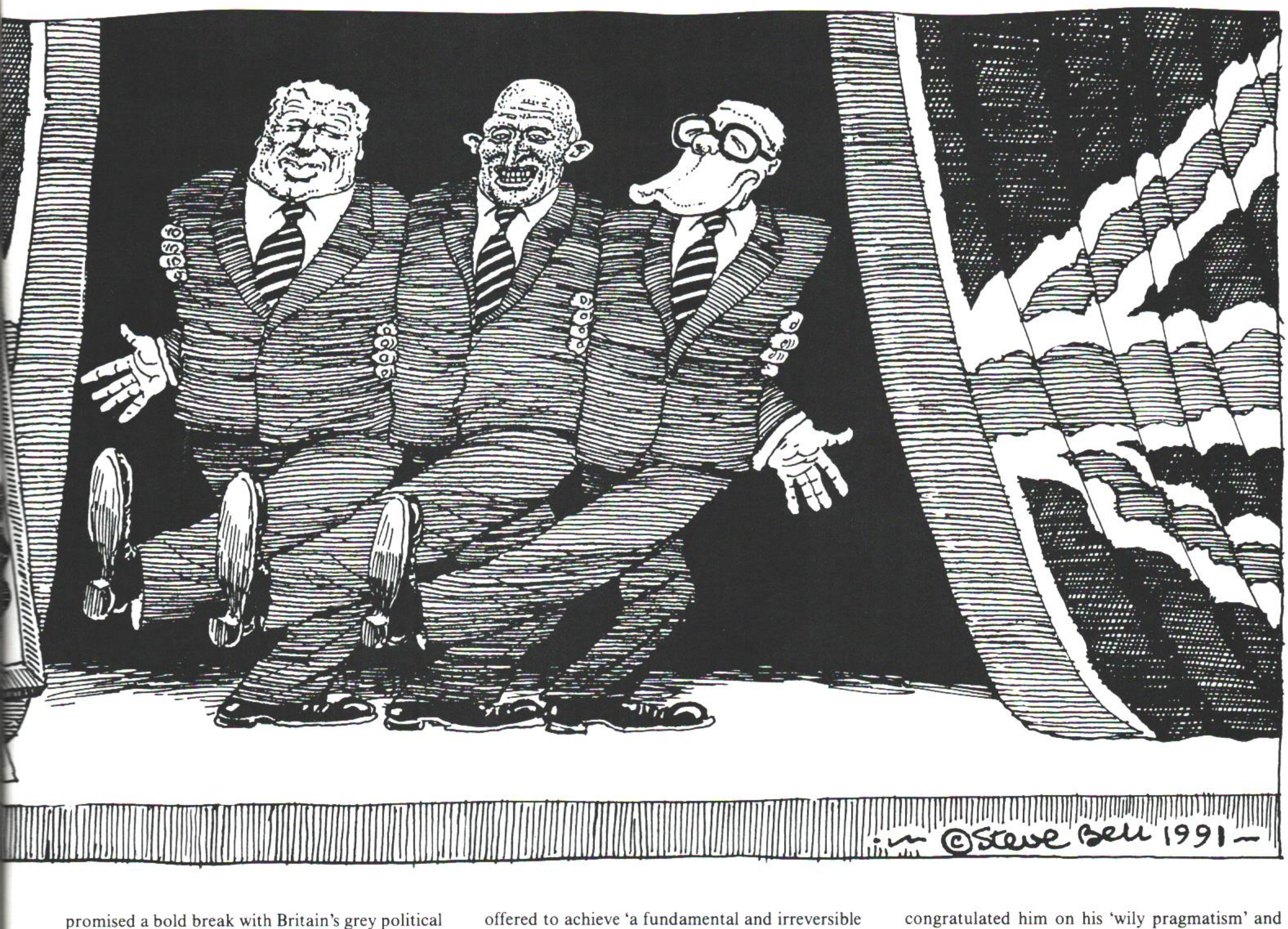
On this page, Mike Freeman outlines the ideological crisis behind the inertia of British politics today. On the pages that follow, we examine different aspects of the problem. It all underlines the pressing need to establish an alternative political current—a need which *Living Marxism* is striving to fulfil

Steve Bell's 'Greymen' cartoon is a perceptive comment on the state of British politics today. It indicates the ideological exhaustion of the major parties and their convergence around programmes as bland and indistinguished as the personalities of the party leaders. It reflects a widespread disillusionment with the pragmatism and opportunism of mainstream politics in the nineties.

Conventional politics as conducted by the major parties inspire no popular enthusiasm or strong identification, even though they may still draw people to the polls. The radical vogue for the politics of citizenship and individual rights is one expression of the decline in allegiance to traditional parties and the collective interests they uphold.

The peculiar feature of British politics after the Gulf War and at the start of the general election campaign is the absence of any forward momentum in any of the major parties. The Conservative Party is now led by a man whose main claim to popular support is that he is not Margaret Thatcher. After a decade of proclaiming the virtues of the Thatcher revolution the Tory Party panicked at the intense unpopularity of their three times election-winning leader and unceremoniously ditched her as the general election drew near.

Labour too has repudiated its past, abandoning its historic links to the labour movement and its traditional state socialist programme, but failing to discover either a new social base or a distinctive set of policies. A decade ago the Liberals and the Social Democrats offered to 'break the mould' of British politics, but have ended up conforming to it by pursuing self-destructive squabbles and surviving in the old centre party role of repository of protest votes at by-elections. More recently the Greens



promised a bold break with Britain's grey political traditions, only to be marginalised by the Greening of the mainstream parties.

The Gulf War also exposed the absence of any independent dynamic among the forces on the radical end of the British political spectrum. Influential academics, intellectuals and journalists, such as Fred Halliday, Michael Ignatieff and Neil Ascherson, joined the bulk of the Labour Party and the labour movement in the pro-Western war camp. CND took an equivocal stand, opposing the war but refusing to oppose Western imperialism. At the end of the war the left heaved a collective sigh of relief and returned to the campaign against the poll tax. The common theme is a desperation to avoid isolation by linking up with middle class dissidents. The result is that the left drifts to the right and becomes even more isolated and ineffectual.

The absence of any momentum behind any of the key forces of British politics means that there is no scope for a 'Gulf factor'. Thatcher's victory in the Falklands contributed to an already existing swing towards the Tories as a result of domestic factors to give them an electoral triumph in 1983. The neutral impact of the Gulf War on British politics is a result, not only of the consensual manner in which John Major (and Neil Kinnock) pursued the war (for fear of losing popular support if things went badly), but also of the stagnation of domestic politics.

The evident cynicism of the British electorate towards the major parties in the 1990s is the outcome of their experience of these parties in the seventies and eighties. In 1974 the Labour Party was returned to power, at the onset of the recession that has subsequently recurred, on an ambitious programme of industrial and social reform. Labour offered to achieve 'a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families'. Even Denis Healey offered to 'squeeze the rich until the pips squeak'. Labour in government, however, turned out to be a cruel disappointment. It squeezed wages through the 'social contract', imposed cuts in welfare spending and presided over the emergence of mass unemployment. Labour was put to the test and exposed as inadequate to public needs: Labour has yet to recover from the effects of this disillusionment. Under Kinnock Labour has abandoned nationalisation, state planning and its historic commitments to the labour movement and the welfare state.

Economic miracle exposed

In the eighties, it was the Tories' turn to be exposed. Thatcher offered a 'revolution' of market principles and privatisation, home ownership, share ownership and tax cuts. Yet by the time she left office, the Thatcher 'miracle' had run aground on economic recession. The fact that Labour late in the day opted to espouse major elements of Thatcherite policy helped to disguise the disastrous consequences of this policy and minimised the damage caused by its exposure.

These failures have led to the discrediting of state socialism on the one hand, a lack of enthusiasm for free market dogma on the other, and a tendency to eschew broad programmatic principles altogether in favour of a narrow pragmatism. The way in which Labour has adopted the main features of the Thatcherite programme has helped to disguise its irrelevance for the nineties.

Assessing Major's first 100 days one commentator congratulated him on his 'wily pragmatism' and dubbed him 'a tactical wizard in the Harold Wilson class', though he acknowledged that this was 'an ambiguous compliment' (Michael White, *Guardian*, 7 March). Others have dubbed Major Mr Nice and have warmly approved his attempts to distance himself from Thatcherite ideology. Kinnock has elevated pragmatism to a matter of principle with his frequent statement that any measures which will enhance the prospects of a Labour government are justified. Kinnock's critics on the left acknowledge the opportunist character of this approach, but generously accept that he has no alternative but to play this cynical game. There are few hard feelings for rising Labour MPs such as Joan Ruddock and Kate Hoey who have shown their willingness to abandon any principle in the cause of assisting Kinnock to power (and themselves into government office).

The narrow pragmatism espoused by Major and Kinnock and the rest reflects a wider loss of confidence in wide-ranging political solutions to the problems of British society. The failures of the past have left a legacy of despondency about embarking on ambitious schemes to tackle the nation's social and economic ills. On all sides theory is shunned as dogma, broad policy alternatives as dangerous ideological snares. Even the Thatcherites are now regarded as too dogmatic, too ideological, by the new breed of Major pragmatists, just as Tony Benn's proposals are dismissed by the Kinnock leadership. The problem, however, is that pragmatism cannot provide any systematic response to the profound crisis of British capitalism. Nor can it provide a mechanism for rallying popular support for any political party during an election campaign.

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The Tories

Is there still no alternative?

Sean Thomas on the problem of John Major's pragmatic politics

'I am not ideological in any way', said John Major, outlining his own brand of Conservatism for the nineties. Major's move to dump some of the ideological baggage of the Thatcher era along with the poll tax, and to project a blander, 'nicer' image of the Tory Party, has been widely hailed as a shrewd move. In fact Major is simply making a virtue out of a necessity. His government is not ideological because the Tories have no vision, no programme of action and no new set of policies to implement.

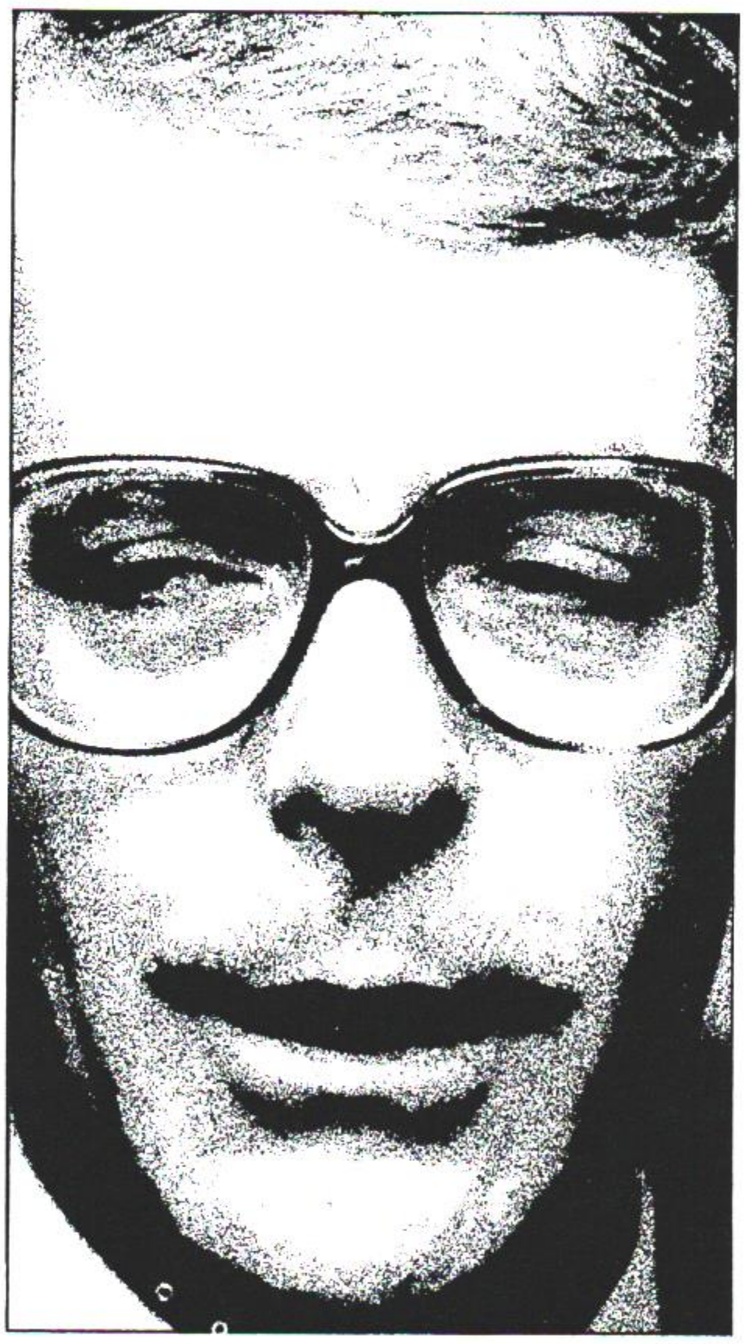
It is one thing to distance yourself from the most unpopular policies of the Thatcher period. It is another thing entirely to introduce new policies which can deal with the fundamental problems facing the government—most importantly, the crisis in the British economy. Apart from an admission that the economy will *contract* by two per cent this year, the March budget introduced by chancellor Norman Lamont ignored the reality of the recession. In recent years, as the Thatcher government ran out of ideas, it became usual for the Queen's speech (outlining the legislative programme for the parliamentary year) not to include any economic policy. Lamont's March effort surpassed this, however, becoming the first *budget* speech not to include any economic policy.

Stale leftovers

Look at the proposals put forward in the budget, and the policies for the forthcoming election manifesto drawn up during March by Chris Patten, party chairman, and Sarah Hogg, head of the No 10 policy unit. There is only one major policy proposal which touches upon the economy: more privatisation. There are plans to privatise the coal industry, British Rail and Royal Mail parcel delivery (*if* and when they become remotely profitable), and to sell off most of the remaining government stock in British Telecom. There are even plans to open 'share shops' on the high street to facilitate the sale of privatised stock.

The irony is that privatisation was a policy most closely associated with Thatcher's chancellor Nigel Lawson, who is now blamed by many Tories for creating today's economic problems. They are quick enough to scapegoat Lawson for the crisis. Yet when it comes to solutions, they can do no better than to warm up the leftovers of his stale old programme.

Selling off state corporations to the speculators, financial institutions and asset-strippers did nothing substantial to deal with British industry's lack of competitiveness during Lawson's 'economic miracle' of the eighties. It is hard to see why similar sales (of less attractive assets) should work miracles in the recessionary nineties. Marketing public companies on the cheap is not going to solve the problems of investment in British manufacturing. 'Share shops' may not even have a high street to operate in if the collapse of retailing continues.



Lacking any coherent policies to tackle the fundamental weakness of the economy, the Major government has fallen back on singing the praises of nineties pragmatism as opposed to eighties ideology. Yet Major's aim is the same as Thatcher's: to ensure that British capitalism survives the recession. His promotion of pragmatism is simply a justification for crisis management. And however it is packaged, crisis management of the capitalist economy always takes place at the expense of working class people. Which is why Major's pragmatic economic policies are, if anything, making things even worse than they were under Thatcher. Unemployment is soaring upwards once more, at a time when benefits are worth less and state harassment of claimants is more intense than it was in the early eighties. For the first time in decades, British employers are also beginning to impose cash pay cuts on their workforces.

The Major government's assault on jobs and living standards may be less ideologically packaged than Thatcher's was, but that is partly because there is not much left to be ideological against. The Tories cannot launch the same sort of high-profile political war against the trade unions and the Labour Party which they did a decade ago. The defeat and collapse of the old labour movement means that there are no more 'enemies within' to confront, no 'loony left' councils, nothing that can be branded as an organised threat to the 'British way of life'. This is the one successful legacy of the Thatcher government: its success in neutralising the official opposition. It helps to explain why, so far at least, Major has found it relatively easy to pursue his harsh, 'pragmatic' economic policies. But the lack of serious ideological issues also presents the Tory Party with a potential problem.

The end of ideology?

A decade ago, Thatcher's crusade against the opposition enabled the Tories to unite and cohere their forces. The aggressive ideology of the Thatcher government gave the Conservatives a sense of purpose and direction, which could carry them through political difficulties and compensate for their lack of effective economic policies. Pragmatism is a poor substitute. Sensing as much, Thatcherite loyalists in the Tory ranks are bitterly complaining about Major's public renunciation of all things ideological. But the old policies which they want to uphold, like the poll tax, are themselves discredited. The Tory vision of the eighties is exhausted, and none of them has a meaningful alternative with which to replace it.

Major's pragmatic repackaging of the Tory image and ditching of unpopular policies may win the next election. But it cannot address the structural problems of the economy, nor can it galvanise genuine public enthusiasm. The only thing in the Tories' favour is that the main opposition parties have no more idea than they do of where their next policy is coming from.

'There Is No Alternative' was once Thatcher's famous rallying cry against the opposition. It is perhaps more true than ever of the opposition parties today, after a decade in which they have taken on board many principles of Tory politics. The ease with which Lamont was able to take on board elements of Labour Party policy in his budget demonstrated the lack of political differences between the parties. But today, the accusation that 'There Is No Alternative' can also be levelled against the Tories. The radical Thatcherite programme is exhausted. But her party has nothing except pragmatism to put in its place. From the Major government through to the Thatcherite rump, the Tories have no alternative. British society, however, is crying out for one.

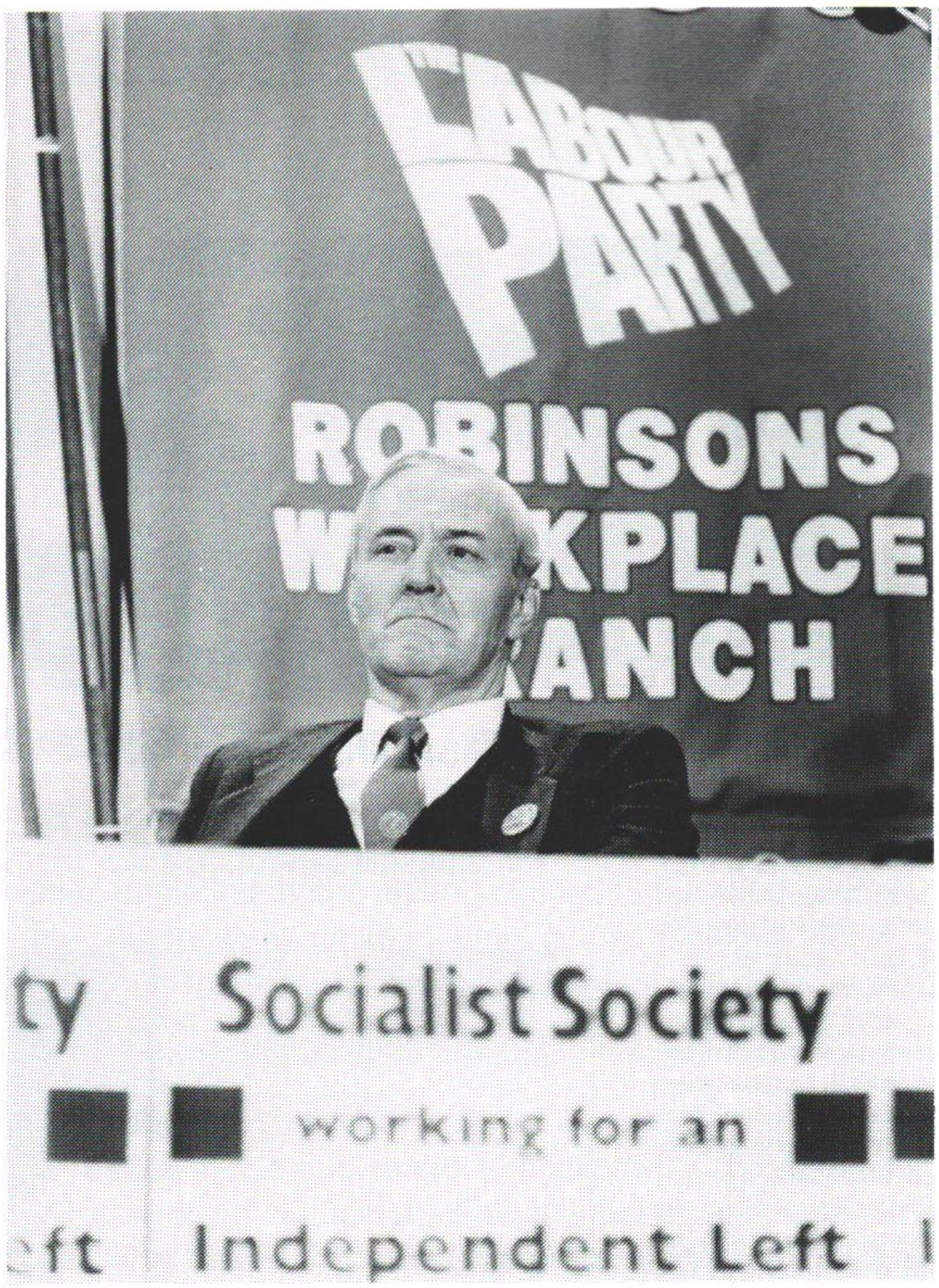


Photo: Pandora Anderson

The Labour left appears incapable of gaining independence from its dead traditions

The left

Repackaging the past

Keith Tompson finds the left as bereft of vision as the right

One of the ironies of the present impasse in British politics is that the left, far from posing a dynamic alternative, often looks like the most conservative element of all. Mired in the traditions of the past, the left trails hopelessly behind events, apparently unable to break out of its spiral of decline. Every left-wing initiative or idea today simply looks like another attempt to dress up old habits as new thinking.

There have been many attempts to explain the decline of the left as an inevitable consequence of objective changes in society. In fact the left's crisis is largely of its own making.

Throughout the post-war period, the main groups and individuals on the British left have accepted a subordinate role in the organisations of the official labour movement. They have never offered their own intellectual or practical responses to the problems facing society, always preferring to stand behind the official organisations of the Labour Party and the trade unions. The left has sought to attach itself to other political and social movements in an attempt to overcome its isolation from the mainstream of political life. This strategy has become a major contributory factor in the left's decay.

The left has concentrated its efforts on working in three spheres: the trade unions, the Labour Party (especially in local government), and single-issue campaigns. In each of these areas of political work, left-wing forces have made themselves dependent upon the initiatives of the labour movement bureaucracy or the liberal intelligentsia. The problem is that each of these bases on which the left has relied for its own growth is now either finished or in a state of apparently terminal decline.

Stranded and isolated

The influence and and the authority of the trade unions have been progressively eroded over the past decade. The official labour movement has not only been under sustained attack from the Tory government and the employers; it has also lost the support of its own members through its inability to meet the challenge of a new, more aggressive era in industrial relations. The mobilising potential of the trade union bureaucrats is now minimal, and the benefits the left gained from tail-ending them are a thing of the past.

The Labour Party option has also been steadily closing for the left over recent years. Under Neil Kinnock's leadership, Labour has cut many of its traditional links with the trade unions and converted into an openly pro-capitalist centre party, a sort of pink imitation of the Tories. The left has been driven out of its positions of influence in the party, losing its hold in local government through a combination of pressure from the Tories and the Labour leadership. Because the left usually rose through the Labour machine by committee-room wrangling rather than on the basis of popular support for socialist policies, it has had no independent base to fall back on.

The old single-issue campaigns offer little more comfort to the left today. Over the years the left has latched on to various of these, from CND to the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and done much of the legwork. However, the left-wing groups rarely distinguished themselves politically from the labour movement bureaucrats or liberal intelligentsia leading the campaigns. The result was that they failed to establish a distinctive left-wing approach to political struggle. They were seen instead as a part of somebody else's campaign; and often an irritating part at that. As movements like CND have declined in the conservative climate of recent years, and moved rightwards to adopt a more moderate lobbying approach, the left has been stranded and isolated.

As its traditional bases of support have been eroded, the left itself has gone into serious decline. There is clearly no future in pursuing the old avenues and approaches. Yet many left-wing groups have become so attached to the methods of the past that they appear incapable of adopting new perspectives. Methods of work which began as tactics have become a way of life. The left's inability to break free from its subservience to the official labour movement means that it can only respond to new circumstances by repackaging the old politics.

The leading spokesmen of the Labour left have spent the past few years repackaging and relaunching themselves in alliance with various groups of liberals and radicals. Charter 88, *Samizdat*, the Socialist Society and the Red-Green Alliance were just some of the initiatives launched with trumpet fanfares and promises to transform politics as we know it. Charter 88, a campaign for a written constitution and bill of rights, seems to have been reduced to an annual advert in the *Guardian*. *Samizdat*, the journal which was supposed to form 'a popular front of the mind' among anti-Tory intellectuals, seems to have disappeared. The Socialist Society has become a dwindling group of academics who have an annual conference and publish the odd article. And whatever happened to the Red-Green Alliance?

Then there is Tony Benn's Labour Party Socialists, formerly the Socialist Movement, which began life as the Socialist Conference. Its first conference in 1987 drew several thousand members of the British left. Its last drew little over 300. It was organised by the Socialist Society. Whatever the combination of titles including the word 'socialist', there is no getting away from the fact that the politics were the same old discredited mixture of state socialism and traditional trade unionism. The inability of these left forces to separate themselves from dead Labour and trade union traditions is now a mortal danger to their own survival.

While the traditional left argues that nothing has changed, others throw all to the winds in the desperate search for a path out of the political wilderness. For the Communist Party everything is changing: it has changed its name to the Democratic Left, and even called its revamped publication *Changes*. This paper claims to be 'renewing socialist politics'. But a quick glance inside ('local income tax should replace poll tax') suggests that, while some on the left can understand that there is no future for the old ways, the most exciting new ideas which they can come up with seem to be stolen from the dusty manifestos of the Liberal Democrats.

The Greens have about as much chance of changing the face of British politics as David Icke has of performing a miracle

Photo: The Guardian

The Greens

Eaten up

John Gibson on the disappearing Green Party

Whatever happened to the Greens? The graduation of David Icke from leading Green spokesman to religious nutcase is just about the only publicity which that party has received this year. Yet the environmental crisis has not exactly been cleared up.

The past year has been marked by the further deterioration of the natural and human environment. Scientists are now united in the view that global warming will have a major impact on humanity and a destructive one in many low-lying third world countries. In the third world, clean water is unavailable to 1.2 billion people according to the World Health Organisation. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, USA, smog cuts out the sun and 80 per cent of young people have 'notable abnormalities in lung tissue'. In London, the Greens' arguments about the deterioration of the quality of life seem to be confirmed every day.

Despite all of this, the past year has also brought the decline of the British Greens. The Green Party is now in a financial crisis. In England and Wales, membership has fallen by around 20 per cent. After polling over 14 per cent in the 1989 Euro-elections, their support is back down to between one and three per cent in the opinion polls. (This decline is not just a British phenomenon: the West German Greens didn't win any seats in the new all-German parliament, and in smog-bound California the voters decisively rejected 'Big Green', a bill to enforce strict anti-pollution measures.)

Green = anti-growth

To assess why the Green Party has failed to sustain its challenge in Britain, let's first establish just what the British Greens represent.

The Green Party's reputation for radicalism is largely undeserved. Many of their policies are very close to the same moderate centre ground which all of the parliamentary parties now inhabit. Even on the poll tax, for example, the party refused to take a stand in support of non-payment because it didn't want to be seen to be encouraging law-breaking. Amid the recent speculation about whether leading Green Jonathon Porritt would join the Liberal Democrats, there was no policy difference expressed between the 'radical' Porritt and the bland Paddy Ashdown.

On those issues where the Greens do have a distinctive line, their philosophy is even more conservative than those of the mainstream parties. To the Greens, the enemy of the environment is economic growth, 'progress' in all its forms. The Greens want a stationary society, with a lower standard of living than the miserly one which most of us have now. 'It would be an essential asset objective of any Green government to reduce the material consumption per person in the UK to that of an internationally sustainable level', they state in their 1990 'Manifesto for a sustainable society'.

Such a utopian and regressive approach could never have widespread popular appeal in modern society. Nor does it lay the basis for building an influential movement of any sort. With the British economy in serious recession and millions of people's jobs and wages already under threat, calls for us to take a further cut in living standards are hardly likely to inspire much enthusiasm from the mass of the population (although no doubt the Tories would be willing to appropriate parts of the argument if they were having trouble selling the idea of wage cuts).

The major appeal of the conservative ideas now associated with the Greens has always been to disaffected sections of the middle classes, and even the aristocracy (witness the high profile of the Duke of Edinburgh in the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the work of Prince Charles), as well as eccentric capitalists like James Goldsmith. Green politics are essentially a rich man's game. Those who have all that they need can afford to pontificate on such problems as the 'overproduction' of consumer goods.

The mode of organisation fitting this political orientation and base of support is that of a pressure group. In Britain today, there are many such bodies, from the Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace to a variety of conservationist groups. Despite calling themselves a party, the British Greens fit into this pattern. They are a pressure group, and their current low level of active support is the normal situation. The period 1988-1989, when the Greens won significant backing, was the exception. The real question is not 'whatever happened to the Greens?', but, 'how did a pressure group ever manage to look like a political force?'.

It was the political problems besetting the mainstream parties which stimulated the growth in Green Party support. The Tory programme was looking increasingly tired, Labour seemed bereft of direction after a third successive electoral defeat, and the Alliance was collapsing. These factors were probably more responsible than even environmental problems for encouraging people to vote Green. The low-point in class struggle, and downplaying of political issues related to class, also created more scope for the Greens' emphasis on individual citizenship. They managed to capture the mood of the moment among sections of the middle class, and to attract protest votes on a large scale.

So what has changed? All of the factors favouring the British Greens in 1988/89 still appear to be present. The inevitable conclusion is that the collapse of support for the Greens highlights the limitations of their own politics. They have achieved the most that a pressure group can hope for—having some of their ideas adopted by the major parties. There is no independent role for them as a political force. As soon as the other parties started to take on board some of their environmental rhetoric, the Greens were in trouble. They could only criticise the mainstream parties for not going far enough, confirming their own status as a moderate pressure group rather than an alternative political party. Ironically, it was the Greening of British politics which helped to undermine the Green Party.

The increased public exposure of the Greens after the Euro-elections also exposed the irrelevance of their more distinctive policies to the problems of modern society. The places where Green parties had done best in those elections were Britain and France, the two countries in which they had previously done worst and were consequently least well known. Over the past two years, it has become clear that people voted Green despite rather than because of Green Party politics.

The Greens managed to take temporary advantage of the malaise in British politics. It is even conceivable that they might do so again in the future. But their prospects for changing the British political map look as gloomy as the future of the world according to David Icke.

Beating boredom by taking control

Politics needn't be dull; from mass unemployment to the Birmingham Six, there are plenty of potentially explosive issues around. The problem, says Linda Ryan, is getting people to see that we can do something about them

My mother no longer watches the news. That is a major statement on the state of British politics. All her life, but especially since my father died 15 years ago, my mother has religiously watched the news on both ITV and BBC. Now she says it is not worth watching. She is of the opinion that since the demise of Mrs Thatcher nothing interesting ever happens. Neither Major nor Kinnock nor even that handsome Mr Ashdown has the ability to keep my mother awake. She says she will continue to keep one eye on the *Daily Telegraph,* 'in case something turns up'.

Little life left

In her own instinctive way, my mother has grasped an essential feature of British political life: that politics in Britain has very little life left in it. It certainly has little meaning for most people. Political differences and debates seem to have few consequences. On all the essentials the mainstream parties are in agreement. Nobody, but nobody, in parliamentary politics wants to vacate the centre ground. Since all the discussion takes place within such narrow parameters, you need to be an astute connoisseur of the centre to detect the differences in policy.

The convergence of the parliamentary parties has become even clearer since Major became prime minister. During the Thatcher era there was at least a bit of rhetorical extremism. Now it is merely a question of who can be a clever dick in parliament.

Nothing really matters

If we believed in conspiracy theories, we could be excused for thinking that there is a plot afoot to deactivate the British people by putting them to sleep through boredom. The most tragic consequence of the slow death of British politics is that it reinforces the already widespread disposition towards apathy and the acceptance that nothing matters much. In the absence of a culture of political struggle and opposition, even the low standards of capitalist politics no longer apply. The government is no longer held to account. Even the very formal checks and balances of the system cease to function.

If there is no alternative and no party able to oppose the government, then the announcement of something like the monthly rise in unemployment has very little consequence. The inexorable rise in redundancies is more likely to be interpreted as a fact of life rather than as a political problem. Unemployment then becomes a kind of mini natural disaster, which strikes Britain in a monthly cycle. As a result even those whose jobs are about to be chopped often react with a sense of resignation, since their circumstance seems overwhelmed by forces beyond human comprehension.

In this political environment it is easy to lose perspective on even fundamental issues. For example, by past standards, the release of the Birmingham Six should have provided an occasion for a major public outcry about the injustice of their imprisonment. Coming after the exposure of a series of judicial frame-ups, the Birmingham Six case ought

British politics is boring because all sides are saying the same thing

to have become a major source of embarrassment to the British establishment. And yet, despite the gravity of the injustice involved, the authorities were able to take the whole affair in their stride. Unless something else intervenes, the Birmingham Six could soon become a minor footnote in the official history of British justice.

The Birmingham Six case did not turn into a serious problem for the British state because the authorities are under no pressure. There is no party or movement inside or outside parliament that is forcing the government to explain itself or to defend the system. As a result the government is able to turn a potential scandal into a dry item of news about an unfortunate legal technicality. An horrific judicial crime, which had the potential to become a cause célèbre, can easily be disposed of in today's climate.

Politics is not boring because nothing happens in Britain or the world. Life is no less eventful than in the past. Working people are still exploited and face the ordeal of state agencies interfering in their lives, as the people of Orkney can testify. Racism is still a fact of life. And 'justice' is no less selective in helping the rich and penalising the poor than before.

Politics appears boring because everything seems to happen so far away, out of reach of most people. Events, even when they happen next door and directly affect people, lose meaning if they appear to be caused by incomprehensible forces external to their lives. Mainstream British politics, the politics of the centre, works to transform what ought to be major issues of political debate into technical problems which we can do nothing about.

When everything seems so far away, issues appear to be not only meaningless, but also out of our control. A heightened sense of lack of control over what happens in life explains why there has been a mass evacuation of the political scene in Britain, why so few people take a close interest in political events today. And lack of involvement, or even of the potential to become involved, breeds an indifference which borders on boredom.

So how can we deal with the boredom factor in British politics? The obvious solution is to get organised to take control over our lives, by confronting the serious problems like unemployment or injustice which are presently ignored. However, that is easier said than done. The old institutions and traditions through which people could mobilise to fight for their cause are now extinct or are mere shells. There are large parts of Britain, for example the south and south-east of England, which have become political graveyards. In these areas millions of working class people have no organisations which they can call their own. Even the unions lack a presence on the ground. So the old ways are not going to be of any use to those who want to take control today. The problem is that, as yet, no new institutions or organisations have emerged to fill the vacuum left by the disintegration of the old labour movement.

It is not possible today to translate the desire to take control of our lives into an organised challenge to the status quo. That does not mean that it is impossible to organise anything. Rather it means that, at this stage, there is no movement that could bring everything together in a more generalised form of political organisation. Before anybody even starts thinking about an era of mass mobilisations, we will have to start working towards the creation of a new political culture.

The first step can be as simple as this. If people knew what was really going on, if they understood the situation, then politics would have more life to it. It would become much more interesting. One reason why working people feel that things are out of control is because the meaning of important events is often not at all clear. Nobody can blame them for not understanding the dynamics of the current economic crisis. After all, the capitalist recession is not even debated any more. All that the Labour Party ever demands is that interest rates should come down a couple of points, that there should be a bit more youth training, etc. Nobody even asks the fundamental questions about the recession, like why we should be expected to accept unemployment or lower wages so that the bosses can restore their profit levels.

Clarifying the situation and teaching ourselves about the reality of modern capitalism is the only antidote to the sickness which afflicts British politics. The boredom ultimately comes from hearing one point of view. The faces may be different but the message is the same. The alternative view can only emerge through re-educating ourselves. Through that process of education, we can begin to gain the sort of understanding that will be necessary for taking control over our lives.

The British establishment is spiritually dead and morally bankrupt. It has nothing new to offer or to say. Anything that is alive in Britain comes from below. This is very clear for example in the case of music. Music that makes you want to dance and inspires you to dream does not come from the stockbroker belt of the home counties. Music with life in it emerges from the streets of working class communities, and is then reproduced in a sanitised form as pop. The same holds for politics and ideas. The people who are now excluded from the political process are the ones with the energy and the imagination to shape the future.

In the end, there is no point complaining that parliamentary politics is boring. What else can we expect from the mainstream parties? The solution is to build an alternative political culture. It is time to go back to school to learn how we can begin to take control over our lives. Even my mother is not too old to have a go.

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Harrods staff stage token lunchtime protest against job cuts: the new working class still suffers the consequences of capitalism, but lacks a clear sense of its own strength to hit back

Whatever happened to the working class?

Living Marxism is promoting a controversial analysis of the present conjuncture, under the heading 'Midnight in the Century' (see the December 1990 and April 1991 issues). This month, Mick Hume examines the unprecedented crisis of working class identity, and suggests the need for a fresh approach to the politics of the class struggle

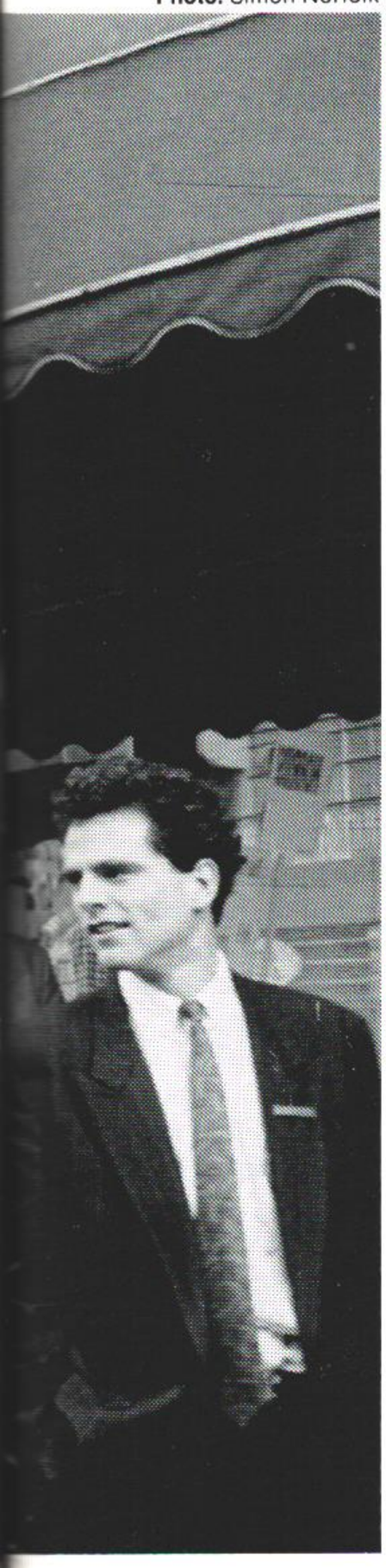

Photo: Simon Norfolk

One reason why politics seem so miserably grey today is that many of the most important questions are not even raised. Although British capitalism is in a desperate slump, none of the major parties sees fit to question the superiority of the market economy. Nor is there any debate over such serious problems as soaring unemployment or the start of a wave of cash pay cuts. These social problems are often depicted as unpleasant but unavoidable facts of life, like the weather. Even the left and the trade unions seem incapable of making unemployment into an issue. Where are the big 'right to work' demonstrations and TUC marches for jobs that accompanied the last dramatic surge in the jobless figures a decade ago?

This peculiar state of affairs illustrates a central tenet of our 'Midnight in the Century' analysis: that, for the first time in a century, the working class has no presence on the political stage today. It has no voice in public debate, and its concerns make no impact upon the national agenda. In short, as a political force, the working class has ceased to exist. Nor is this just a British phenomenon. A similar process is observable around the globe. This poses a considerable problem for the future of humanity. The working class is the section of society with the potential to change the world for the better, by overcoming the limitations which capitalism imposes on human progress. The question facing those of us who believe in and seek such progress, therefore, is how to rectify the situation by reconstituting the working class as a political force.

Why workers?

Why is the working class so important? Despite the impression often given by those on the left, there is nothing mystical about the powers invested in the working class. Workers are just ordinary individuals: you, me and our neighbours. These individuals acquire the potential to play an historic role in changing the world only through the particular position they occupy within the capitalist system.

Through the operation of the capitalist economy, millions of workers are fused into a single class by undergoing a common experience: whether their collars are white or blue, they all survive only by selling their ability to work to employers in exchange for a wage. Instead of a collection of free individuals, capitalist society becomes divided along class lines, with a propertied minority exploiting the labour of the majority in order to realise a private profit. This wage-labour/capital relationship continually creates and recreates the working class as a collective grouping with two distinctive features.

First, the members of the working class have a common interest in transforming society and replacing the profit system with one based upon production for human need. This is clearest in the devastated wastelands of the third world. Even in the heartlands of the prosperous West, however, every worker's life is dominated and distorted by the capitalist market. Some wage-earners are slightly better off than others, but all are exploited, the vast majority of the wealth which they produce being appropriated by the employers. Nor is any worker guaranteed a decent living standard; as today's recession has illustrated, even highly skilled and highly mortgaged engineers and computer operators can lose their jobs and lifestyles if their employers decide that the company's profits are insufficient. And even when they have jobs, the working class still suffers the rubbishy quality of life, from impure water to schools without books or teachers, produced by the profit-led basis on which capitalism distributes the resources of society. In short, no worker can have a genuine long-term stake in the preservation of the status quo.

The second quality which distinguishes the working class is that its members have the collective power to do something about their predicament. The working class constitutes by far the largest section of modern society. It draws its potential strength not merely from its numbers, however, but from its position in the production process. Workers' labour is the source of profit within the capitalist economy. This puts them in a powerful strategic position. As the producers of wealth they are perfectly placed to take control away from the parasitical capitalist minority, and to force through fundamental changes in the way that society produces and distributes its resources, to the benefit of the majority. In creating the working class, capitalism does not simply make millions of exploited victims; it also creates, as somebody once said, its own powerful gravediggers. In the struggle to emancipate itself from capitalist domination, the working class has the ability to free all other social groups from the oppressive grip of the system, and to advance the condition of humanity as a whole. This is why the working class can justifiably be called *the universal class*.

The two characteristics of the working class outlined above give it the potential to play an historic role in transforming the world. The existence of that potential should not be in question, even today. It is given by the continuation of the wage-labour/capital relationship. The precise shape of this relationship may alter, as with the large-scale switch from manufacturing to service industries in Britain over recent years. But the exploitative essence of the relationship between the boss and his workforce remains intact—in which case, so does the revolutionary potential of the working class.

Conscious class

However, while the potential power of the working class may be fairly constant, its prospects of realising that potential vary greatly from one era to another. The key variation of which we need to take account is this: to what extent do workers acquire a *consciousness of themselves* as a collective class with the power and the motives to make history? And as a consequence, how far are they able to give the working class a political expression that makes an impact upon society? After all, no matter how much potential power we hold, if we are unaware of it or unable to mobilise it then we will continue to be dominated by those who are weaker but more sure of themselves.

It is in this area that we face peculiar problems in the present conjuncture: not in the physical existence, but the political existence of the working class. Let us now turn to consider this problem in more detail.

Ebb and flow

In so far as these things are measurable, it is clear that class conflict between capitalists and workers is at a low ebb in 1991. The current strike statistics in Britain, for example, show that employers are now losing fewer working days through industrial action than at any time over the past 60 years. This is a dramatic development which ought at least to suggest that some important changes might be taking place. Yet many on the left insist upon trying to fit present trends into the patterns of the past. They point out that the class struggle has always ebbed and flowed: thus the labour unrest which followed the First World War and culminated in the General Strike of 1926 was followed by a generally quiet period through the thirties and forties and into the fifties; then came the new wave of militancy in the late sixties, and the big strikes of the seventies and early

eighties, which eventually gave way to the 'downturn' of the last few years. It is therefore only a matter of time, many left-wing analysts conclude, before the cycle comes around again and we experience a similar upturn in industrial disputes. In which case, all that we have to do is to bide our time and keep the old red flags flying, until the workers' army stirs and lines itself up behind us once more.

The left's notion of a repetitive, cyclical class struggle, based upon a study of the ebb and flow of strike statistics, entirely misses the point about what has changed between previous periods and today. The most significant change concerns the view which the working class has of itself and its role in society.

Us and them

In the past, the working class developed distinctive traditions and defined itself as a collective group in response to its experience of capitalism. As the system brought them together in communities and workplaces, workers developed a common identity. Of course they did not all assume exactly the same outlook. Class consciousness is always unevenly spread. A significant proportion of British workers, for example, has long voted Conservative, deferred to the ruling elite and opposed any expression of class struggle. And few of those who hated the Tories and the bosses achieved an all-rounded anti-capitalist view of the world. However, what large numbers of workers did develop was *a basic self-identity as a class*. They adopted a collective 'us and them' attitude of antagonism to the ruling classes, practised solidarity with each other in times of trouble, and agreed that some sort of change in the way society worked was necessary and desirable to improve their lives.

Through our century, the class struggle has indeed ebbed and flowed dramatically, especially on the continent of Europe. Yet in different circumstances, the traditions of the working class continued to exert considerable influence. The deeply imbued sense of class and desire for social change remained strong among many workers, even when they suffered serious setbacks and the class struggle seemed all but extinguished.

In Britain, for instance, the crushing defeat of the 1926 General Strike ended an era of trade union militancy and led to immense demoralisation among militant workers. But it did not destroy their belief in the need to change the system. Instead, the defeat of industrial action led workers to try another strategy; at the next general election in 1929, they elected a Labour government for only the second time, as an expression (albeit a misguided one) of their collective aspiration to transform the way in which the country was run.

After the Nazis

The point can be illustrated even more forcefully through the experience of Germany under Nazi rule in the thirties and forties. The Nazis banned independent trade unions and political opposition, and conducted a ruthless witch-hunt against working class militants and leftists. Yet the traditions of class identity survived even those dark years. When the Nazis fell from power at the end of the Second World War, the working class in Berlin immediately set up 'anti-fascist committees'; these were in fact embryonic revolutionary workers' councils, seeking to take control of the city.

The continuity of its traditions ensured that the working class retained a political existence regardless of what point the ebb and flow of the class struggle had reached at a particular time. The persistence of a class identity was always more important than bare strike statistics in determining the prospects for progressive change at any moment. If we are to get to grips with the changed political climate today, we first have to grasp the fact that this traditional class identity no longer exists. We are now faced by a unique combination of historically low levels of struggle, and a crisis of working class identity.

What is responsible for this state of affairs? Several trends pushing the working class away from its traditional identity have developed in parallel to one another. Some are longstanding, others are relatively new. But together they have now achieved a powerful cumulative impact. Three deserve brief mention.

Heavy metal is dead

First, the changing geography of the modern capitalist economy has altered employment and lifestyle patterns. In Britain, for example, the collapse of heavy-metal manufacturing industries and the expansion of service sectors like banking, finance and retailing have accelerated the decline of many traditional working class communities and trade unions. In sociological discussions of the decline of class traditions, this factor is usually highlighted. In fact, although it plays its part in challenging old loyalties, it is the least important trend. There is no automatic reason why living and working in a new town or a new economic sector should destroy class identity. As noted earlier, workers experience exploitation by capital whether they work in a mill in Manchester or an office in Milton Keynes. The decisive thing is not simply the changes in working class life, but the political climate in which they take place. This is decided by the class struggle.

Exposed as useless

The second, and easily the most important, of the parallel trends has been the way in which the traditional ideas and organisations associated with the working class have been exposed as useless through developments in politics and the class struggle. In Britain the old trade union movement, steeped in the traditions of bureaucratic deal-making and compromise, proved unable to cope with the more directly confrontational approach adopted by Tory governments and employers over the past decade or so. The TUC has declined from being an important national institution, consulted at the highest levels about the running of industry and the country, to being an empty shell ignored by everybody.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party's traditional programme of welfare capitalism and state intervention in the economy failed the test set by the recessions of the seventies and eighties. In the harsher economic climate of recent years, the party itself has abandoned its Labourist past and adopted openly pro-capitalist policies. And on the international stage, the accelerating crisis and collapse of the official Communist parties and the Stalinist bloc in Eastern Europe have struck a decisive blow to a political tradition which we considered corrupt, but which many people equated with the idea of class struggle.

Identity crisis

The third trend is the way in which capitalists and their political representatives have become much more confident about championing their system. The demise of their traditional opponents has allowed the defenders of the status quo to portray the capitalist system as a permanent one, and to dismiss the very idea of change as dangerous utopianism. Many critics of capitalism have been unnerved by these developments, and the once-powerful belief in the need for a different way has been dampened.

The cumulative effect produced by these trends is *a crisis of working class identity*. The old traditions appear discredited to one generation

of workers, and simply outdated and irrelevant to another. There is no longer any real sense of attachment to the old institutions and ideas; and, as yet, there are no new ones to replace them. The result is that, temporarily at least, the working class has no political existence.

Of course, many people still identify themselves as working class (indeed two thirds of all British adults do, according to one survey published last year), and 'us and them' attitudes towards the rich and powerful remain widespread. But today these sentiments are more individualistic than in the past. Many people who will say that they are working class simply mean that they feel hard-up and hard done-by. There is no sense of the working class having the collective strength and ability to change the system, or even to challenge it. Indeed the ignominious failure of Labourism and Stalinism, the political traditions which are usually associated with the struggle for change, means that many workers now question not only the possibility but the very desirability of trying to change society.

There is no sense of attachment to the old institutions and ideas; and as yet, no new ones to replace them

No going back

In this unique political context, there is no point in waiting for the old cycle of militant working class struggles to come around again. Workers will still protest, but without a class identity, their protests will be influenced and directed by other forces: thus while very many working class people were bitter about the poll tax, the opposition to it was shaped by the concerns of moderate middle class dissenters.

Even if workers do respond in anger to problems like unemployment caused by the capitalist economy, the fact that they have no sense of struggling as a class means that they cannot act as the agents of historic change. For the moment, the identity crisis experienced by the working class means that, while its physical potential remains intact, it lacks the political capacity to play the role of the universal class in emancipating humanity. In this situation, traditional notions of working class struggle are meaningless; workers' protests today are often little more than a directionless expenditure of energy.

Eastern promise?

Events in East Germany illustrate the point. The hardship caused by the sudden switch to a market economy in the East has sparked large-scale protests against chancellor Helmut Kohl's government. This has excited many on the European left, who believe they are witnessing the start of an anti-capitalist backlash in Eastern Europe. But these protests must be set in the peculiar political context of our time. The working class suffered worst from the repression and shortages of the Stalinist era. As a result, workers were often the most bitter anti-communists in the East, and they quickly became the most enthusiastic supporters of the introduction of the Western-style market through German reunification. Against this background, it is a pipedream to imagine that their present reaction against the consequences of capitalism and the Kohl government's policies would turn them in a left-wing direction. The more likely upshot is a passive alienation from the system, coupled with more attacks on old Stalinists who are still blamed for the crisis.

Hard facts

The hard fact with which we need to come to terms today is that, from the point of view of making history, the ebb and flow of struggle is largely irrelevant if there is no political mechanism through which workers can express themselves as a class, and no systematic alternative to capitalism through which they can express their distinctive interests. Coming to terms with this situation demands that we be realistic, but not pessimistic. The fact that the traditional working class identity has become a casualty presents us with some problems, and gives the capitalists a considerable advantage for the time being. But it also has a potentially positive aspect: it gives us a unique opportunity to help reforge a new and better-equipped working class identity for the future.

Bad influences

In *Living Marxism,* we have often discussed the bad influences which the political traditions of Stalinism and Labourism exerted over the working class, and expressed our delight that they have gone and will not be coming back. In addition, it is worth noting that other aspects of working class tradition were also problematic. For example, the self-image of the working class was often a very narrow one, restricting workers' concerns to bread and butter matters while bourgeois politicians were allowed to monopolise broader political issues. And the traditional 'us and them' attitudes of the working class also tended to encourage a very exclusive community identity, which could shut out anti-capitalist ideas as the work of 'outsiders'.

The removal of all of the political landmarks of the past leaves the working class vulnerable for now, but it also allows us an opening to try to establish a more mature, anti-capitalist component of a working class identity for our times. The task now is to take the first difficult steps towards *reconstituting the working class as political force.*

Trick and trap

Reconstituting the working class is not something that revolutionary Marxists can go out and do of our own volition. Ultimately it will depend upon events beyond our control in the class struggle, creating the possibility of a more collective working class response in the future. The trick is to recognise that fact of life, without falling into the trap of waiting for the old cycle of militancy to come around once more. In an uncertain world, one thing of which we can be fairly certain is that the class struggle will never be the same again. Governments and employers everywhere are currently searching for new ways to resolve their problems at the expense of the working class. Having abandoned its old traditions, it is unlikely that the response of the working class to the new assaults will fit into the patterns of the past. Those who are holding up the ragged banners of the left at the roadside while they wait for the workers to return are likely to find that they are standing on the wrong road altogether.

Bury the dead

To make the most of future opportunities to reconstitute the working class, we require a new brand of class politics based upon the experience and the issues of our times. It is not good enough to wait for things to start happening; that will already be too late. The time to start is now: developing a critique of the contemporary forms of capitalism, and arming a minority with an understanding of the necessity for social change and the preconditions for achieving it in today's conditions. At a conjuncture when we are surrounded by the wreckage of dead traditions, there is no point in simply repeating our own past principles either. If it is to have any meaning, revolutionary Marxism must be reforged to deal with the modern reality of the world which we are trying to change. Only then will we stand a chance of returning the working class to its rightful place at the centre of history.

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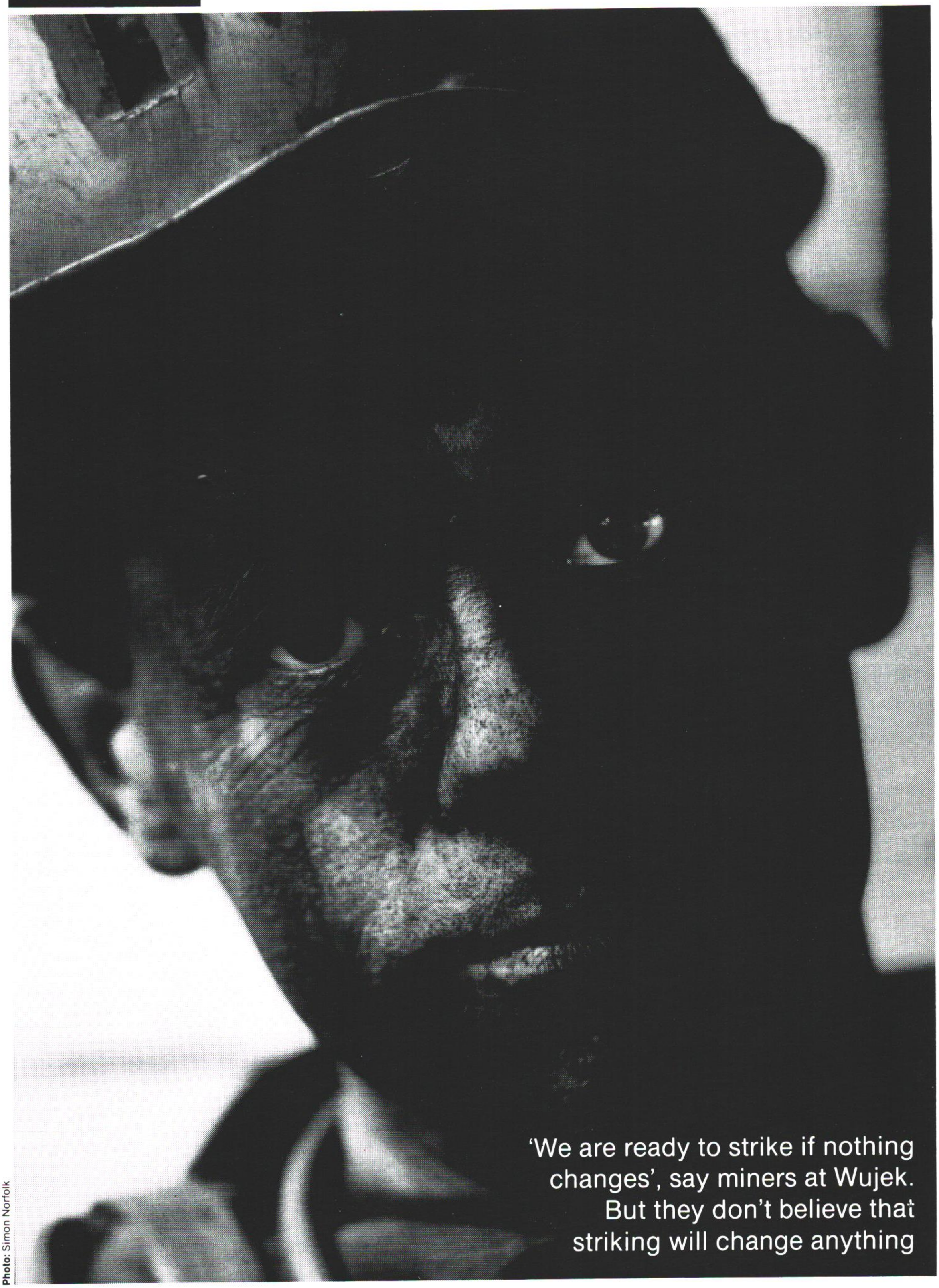

'We are ready to strike if nothing changes', say miners at Wujek. But they don't believe that striking will change anything

Photo: Simon Norfolk

Revolt in Eastern Europe?

'It's not up to us'

The miners at Wujek pit in Silesia are among the angriest workers in Poland. But don't hold your breath waiting for them to lead a working class revolt against the arrival of the capitalist market. Joan Phillips reports

'Nothing has changed here for 10 years. It's just more work and less pay', shouted Leszek. All his mates who were waiting to go down in the cages to start the afternoon shift nodded their heads in agreement. Somebody else tugged my sleeve. 'Our standard of living is falling all the time', cried Wojciech. 'It's worse than in the past.' Outside, Jacek had just finished his shift. 'We are little better off than people in the Soviet Union', he insisted. 'I have no confidence that things will get better.'

'I have a wife and two kids to support' said Jacek, who is 30 but looks 10 years older. 'But I'm only earning two million zloties a month [about £120], and that includes family benefits. It's backbreaking work for a pittance. If I want to buy my children some healthy food like oranges or bananas it takes all my wages and I have nothing left for necessities. I need at least three million zloties a month and even then I wouldn't save anything. If you have a car you need four million a month. I can't even dream of having a holiday.

'To earn a decent wage [£170] you would have to have worked here for 15 years, and you have to work six shifts a week and four Saturdays a month. There's probably only about 100 workers in management positions who earn that much. The director earns 12m a month. Yet miners who sweated here for 40 years are getting a pension of 800 000 zloties a month [less than £50]. They are having to sell rubbish on the streets, while the old nomenklatura who got rich in the seventies and eighties are buying businesses and making a fortune.'

Every miner I met at Wujek pit in Katowice was angry about something. Most complained that they could not live on the money they earned. The average monthly wage for a face worker is about 1 800 000 zloties (less than £110). Contrary to the accepted wisdom at the World Bank, the miners insisted that prices were rising far faster than wages, and that their living standards were worse than in the past.

'Wages are much worse now than in communist times', said Zbigniew. 'We used to get all sorts of fringe benefits, but not any more.' The miners used to receive special allowances such as free coal or holidays for their kids. Now the old wage structure is being abolished but nothing has yet taken its place. 'There is no proper system of wages here. I'm the only person working in my family. We have no money for any pleasures in life, like going out or going on holiday.'

'Nobody cares about us here', was a constant refrain after a litany of complaints about working conditions. 'Only the face is mechanised, everything else has to be done manually', explained Marian: 'We work like animals down there on our hands and knees.' Safety is a big issue. Six miners were killed last year and there were 211 accidents. Miners are under pressure to go back to work before they have recovered from accidents or illnesses. 'The doctor is signing documents saying sick workers should go down the pit when they should be in their beds', spat Leonard in disgust. 'He is not competent to do his job.'

The past lives on

Many miners told me that things were worse than in the past. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this, as some on the left have done, that workers are rejecting the capitalist market. Many workers will say that they were better off in the past, but in the next breath they will say that they would rather starve than go back to the old system. In fact, they blame the old communist bosses for the mess they are in today and blame the new political elite for not exacting revenge.

'The nomenklatura are still sitting in their old places', accused Wladislaw. 'They should be rooted out.' I lost count of how many times people told me that 'nothing has changed', meaning that the old nomenklatura structures of the Stalinist era are intact. Faced with the problems of the present, workers want only to settle scores with the past. When asked what should happen to the nomenklatura, quick as a flash a young miner ran his finger across his throat.

There is immense bitterness about the fact that the nomenklatura is benefiting from the market reforms while workers are suffering. 'Poland's industry was destroyed by the communists and now we must suffer for it. Communists like [Edward] Gierek are to blame for the disaster we're facing today, but he's making money writing his memoirs while we are starving. Other party people had a good time in the West while we worked hard. They are making easy pickings now and we have nothing to show for it.'

Miners at Wujek have good reason to be bitter. They have a score to settle with the old regime. On 12 and 13 December 1981, miners at the pit went on strike in protest at the introduction of martial law. They

demanded the release of all those arrested and an end to state repression. In response, the authorities sent armed forces into the coalmine on 16 December. The military shot dead nine miners and wounded several dozen more.

Today, the miners are still waiting to exact their retribution for the massacre at Wujek. They want to know who gave the orders to open fire. Solidarity leaders at the mine are sitting on a committee investigating the events of December 1981. They expect to complete their deliberations by the summer. But as far as many miners are concerned, it is already too late. 'The people who were responsible for the deaths during martial law are still in positions of power', declared Andrzej. 'They have all got off scot-free. One officer responsible for the killings here went abroad, another died; the rest are sitting pretty.'

The purge that wasn't

When Tadeusz Mazowiecki became prime minister of the first Solidarity-led government in 1989, the miners thought their time had come. They quickly became disillusioned when the expected purge of the nomenklatura never happened. Most voted for Lech Walesa in the presidential elections because he promised to sweep aside the communists. Now they are starting to question whether it will ever happen. 'If the government does not punish them and turn them out, people won't like it. Lech Walesa should create a committee to investigate the past of all these people and make them answer for their crimes', argued Stanislaw.

Most miners have already stopped believing that anybody will stand up for them. They are scathing about Solidarity, which has 1100 members at the pit and three full-time elected officers: 'They are turning their backs on us', shouted Dariusz. 'Solidarity officials think only of their own positions, they don't care about us. There's nobody to defend us now. The trade unions are doing anything except defending workers.' Jacek agreed: 'If you complain about wages to Solidarity, they say "Go and get a job somewhere else then". I can't see them doing anything for us.'

'I've worked here for seven years', said Bronislaw. 'The present Solidarity doesn't represent workers. During communist times if you were dissatisfied you could go to Solidarity and they would help you. Now nobody will help you. If you go to Solidarity and complain, they tell you to go away or to get another job if you don't like it.' Bronislaw is a member of the OPZZ, the official communist union which has 1200 members at the pit, most of them recruited during the days of martial law when you could not get any benefits unless you were a member. Like many of the 5000 miners at Wujek, the majority of whom do not belong to any union, he doesn't have much faith in anybody defending his interests. For him, one union is as good (or as bad) as another.

Stanislaw is not a member of any organisation. 'In 1980, Solidarity was good: it defended workers and other people too. But it's not the same union now. Lech Walesa did a good job 10 years ago, but not any more.' What really sticks in his throat is that Solidarity supported the appointment of the new director Marian Filipek. According to Mieczyslaw Pierankiewicz, the Solidarity leader at Wujek, Filipek is a great improvement. What bothers the miners is that he is an old Stalinist boss as well as 'an absolute dictator'. In the old days he was a member of a regional nomenklatura mining body, Gwarectwo. When this body was dissolved he lost his job, only to get a new one with a little help from Solidarity.

'Chaos not capitalism'

Not only are they becoming disenchanted with their old union, miners are increasingly disillusioned with politics and politicians. Few had a good word for finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz, who has masterminded Poland's economic transition: 'Balcerowicz is only good for those with money', said Albert. 'He hasn't got anything to offer us.' His friends were disappointed that the government's economic reforms had not delivered the living standards which were on offer in the West. 'This isn't capitalism', said one young miner. 'It's just chaos.' Piotr disagreed: 'Yes, it's true that things are bad, but if it wasn't for the Balcerowicz plan, it would be total chaos.'

Most miners are dissatisfied with the government, but they cannot see any alternative to its market reform programme. So while they are critical of the new political elite, they tend to blame the Stalinists for all the problems. One miner argued that Solidarity was 'full of communists and reds' who went into the organisation in order to block reforms. Others were angry about the postponement of the parliamentary elections from the spring to the autumn, saying it proved that the nomenklatura was trying to cling on to power and hinder reform. Marek said he could no longer distinguish between the parties: 'The establishment of power is not clear. The communists are mixed up with the new elite and are holding up the reforms.'

There were mixed views about their old hero, Lech Walesa. 'He hasn't betrayed us. But he doesn't defend us', said Miroslaw. 'He's all mouth and no action.' Others were not so charitable. At a demonstration outside the president's official residence in Warsaw, 2000 miners chanted 'Lech Walesa, you betrayed us. You're the same bastard as they were'. There were conflicting views too about Stanislaw Tyminski, the Polish-Canadian millionaire who came from nowhere to win a substantial vote in the presidential elections. Most miners voted for Walesa, but some were having second thoughts: 'If Tyminski had won the election he would have dismissed all the nomenklatura and punished all those who ruined the economy', said Marcin. 'Walesa cannot do that because of the round-table agreement he made with the communists.'

Others did not vote at all, saying there was nobody worth electing. Their cynicism is likely to be reflected in rising levels of abstentionism at the polls. It is already apparent in the frequently articulated complaint from miners that there isn't anybody who represents them any more. The loss of any sense of their collective strength finds its expression in an overwhelming fatalism.

There is no alternative

When it came to the crunch, not a single miner said he believed it was possible to change things. That does not rule out the possibility that workers will go on strike over wages and conditions. It simply means that in the absence of a coherent political alternative, working class struggles will be an ineffective explosion of anger. 'We are ready to strike if nothing changes', said Artur. 'But we doubt that striking will change anything.' Most miners have already drawn the conclusion that it's not possible to do anything. There was no conception of organising themselves around an alternative viewpoint: 'We can't see any alternative and anyway it's not up to us', said Maciej.

Some miners are thinking of taking Solidarity's advice and leaving. Jacek says he wants to go abroad. He dreams of earning £400 a month in Greece, hardly a fortune, but four times what he's getting now. For those who stay, fatalism and resignation are likely to be the predominant responses to the increasing immiseration created by the arrival of capitalism in Poland.

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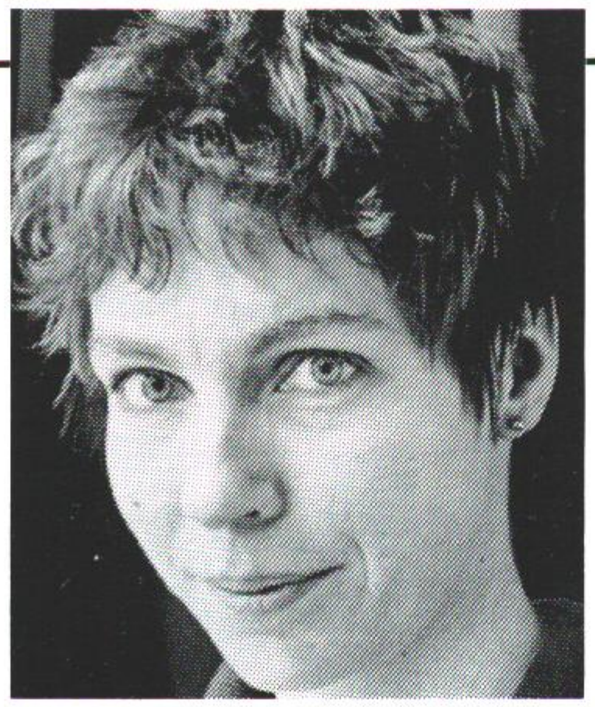

Ann Bradley

Virgin on the ridiculous

The announcement that the Birmingham branch of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) had allowed a virgin to embark on a course of artificial insemination treatment was greeted with predictable hysteria. Dame Jill Knight (Tory MP for Edgbaston) was the first off the starting blocks claiming that 'it is difficult to imagine a more irresponsible act than to assist a woman to have a child in this highly unnatural way'. Her parliamentary colleague, Ann Winterton, condemned it as 'unnatural and immoral', while moral crusader and mother of 10 Victoria Gillick thought it 'outrageous': 'No child should be born into the world in this way.'

The popular press quickly joined in. While the *Daily Mail* ran a hotline for readers to register their views, the *Daily Express* cautioned that 'one virgin birth was enough for all of us' and warned that 'medical ethics have gone beyond the bounds of ethics, morals, religion, humanity and even nature'. Nature, and what's natural, figured very large in the outcry.

The argument that donor insemination goes against nature is a curious one. Heart transplants 'go against nature', so does every medical practice from cancer treatment to antibiotics. Medicine is a struggle to prevent nature taking its course, and society usually regards this as a good thing. It's hard to imagine anyone outside of a religious sect campaigning against a liver transplant on the grounds that it is unnatural. Yet cutting out someone's liver and sticking in a new one is no more or less 'natural' in a biological sense than squirting a syringe full of semen into a woman's vagina.

From the time that somebody first picked up a stick and used it as a tool, humanity has been altering nature. Even many of the things that we refer to as 'nature' are the creation of humanity. The English landscape did not spontaneously organise itself into fields; the countryside has been shaped by centuries of farming. The cows and sheep in the fields are the products of select breeding. The fruit and vegetables we eat have been carefully fashioned to suit our needs. There's nothing more unnatural than a nectarine, it's a product of crude genetic engineering, but nobody gets upset about that.

When the moralists say that donor insemination is unnatural or goes against nature what they really mean is that it doesn't accord with their system of values—and they see their values as unquestionable, hence natural. For the moral conservatives procreation, sex and the family are intrinsically bound together, and they find anything that disentangles them deeply unsettling. The notion of procreation without sex is as disturbing as the notion of sex without the family. It is simply not the way things ought to be done.

The new reproductive technologies question the assumption that falling in love, getting married, and having heterosexual sex (preferably in that order) is the only way to arrange procreative relations. For moral conservatives the traditional family is natural and any other way of rearing or conceiving children is 'perverse'. Today, with a rising number of children being conceived outside marriage and an ever-increasing number of single mothers, the sanctity of family life is already in question. If women can take off to a clinic and choose to be artificially inseminated without even the pretence of a relationship, the importance of the family is undermined still further.

From September clinics offering fertility treatment will be placed under the supervision of the Human Fertilisation Licensing Authority. This is a body made up of 'a cross-section of society' with a brief to see that nothing unnatural goes on. The authority, which includes such notables as Penelope Keith, has declared that, despite pressure from the likes of Jill Knight, it doesn't intend to outlaw artificial insemination for single women, be they virgins, lesbians or whoever. It has reached this decision not because it thinks such women should have the right of equal access to reproductive technologies, but because it is worried that if it were banned in the clinics women would simply do it for themselves. This is not very reassuring. The message is clear: we'd ban it if we could, but as we can't we'd better make sure it's under control.

I thoroughly resent the fact that the establishment places an emphasis on *controlling* fertility treatment instead of *developing* it. There is a common myth that reproductive technologies are developing faster than humanity can control them. The *Express,* unable to think of any reason why a doctor should be involved in such medical practices, warned that 'it is difficult not to suspect that the doctors concerned are just proving how intensely clever they are'. This is ludicrous. Artificial insemination is a more fitting illustration of how primitive reproductive technologies are.

The first recorded case of artificial insemination was 200 years ago in 1790 when a Scottish barber/surgeon inseminated a linen-draper's wife with her husband's sperm. The technique has not developed much. All you need is some decent quality sperm and a syringe. The success rate of assisted reproduction is pitiful. People have developed laser-guided missiles that can penetrate a bunker through an air vent. But we have not discovered how to get a human sperm to penetrate an egg.

The development of reproductive technologies has been held back because society is, even at its most liberal, ambiguous about them. Most people agree that artificial insemination, *in-vitro* fertilisation and other assisted reproduction techniques are acceptable as long as they are channelled towards deserving cases—namely married women who 'deserve' a family. When they are used outside the family the hounds of reaction break loose, as Birmingham British Pregnancy Advisory Service has found to its cost. A *cri de coeur* from the *Express* was that 'we are told that [the virgin] is a heterosexual. But for all anyone knows she may be a lesbian or fervent man-hater'. So what if she was?

The final irony is that, while the moralists moan about single women seeking insemination, they may have to accept some of the responsibility for the increasing demand. Dr Christine Dancey, a psychologist who specialises in psycho-sexual behaviour, recently told the *Times* that some women are seeking donor sperm because they're frightened of getting Aids. The BPAS freezes donated sperm for three months so the donor can be retested for Aids before his sperm is used. Some women, terrified by the Aids panic whipped up by the likes of Jill Knight, Ann Winterton and their cronies, feel that Aids-tested semen is a safer bet than the kind of unsafe sex you need to get pregnant.

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editorial s

The tragedy

As we go to press the world's TV screens are filled with harrowing images of Kurdish refugees fleeing from Saddam Hussein's forces in Iraq. There is a growing clamour for the USA to intervene to protect the Kurds. The British government has proposed that an armed camp be carved out of northern Iraq under the auspices of the United Nations.

In Britain, the sentiment that something must be done for the Kurds is understandably strong, and nobody could oppose the giving of food, blankets or medicine to the refugees. But that is as far as we can go along with the consensus calling for more Western intervention. Political and military interference from the USA, Britain or the United Nations can provide no solutions to the Kurdish crisis. Indeed, it was the intervention of the Western powers in Iraq (with the blessing of the UN) which caused the problem in the first place.

With attention concentrated on the conflict between Saddam and the Kurds, it is easy to lose sight of what started this bloody round of fighting. The fact is that the crisis in Iraq was caused by the US, British and allied invasion.

In the Gulf War, the great Western powers combined their military might in a colonial-style crusade against an Arab country. Their carpet-bombing and awesome range of hi-tech weaponry rained down death and destruction upon Iraq. Estimates of Iraqi dead now range from 200 000 to half a million. The barbaric war turned the clock of industrial progress back a century in Iraq, leaving the country in ruins and its people in desperation. The Iraqi civil war was a direct result of the chaos caused by the Western invasion. There is a straight line leading from US-British aggression against Iraq to Iraqi repression against the Kurds.

Throughout our century, from India to Ireland, the interference of the Western imperialists in the colonial world has led to civil strife in the countries concerned. The most glaring recent example is Lebanon, where Western interference (from the US-backed Israeli invasion of 1982, through the occupation of Beirut by US, British and French forces in 1983, to the Anglo-American complicity in the latest Syrian assault in Beirut last year) has wreaked havoc and intensified the bloody infighting. Every time such a civil war occurs, the Western powers pontificate about the savagery of third world peoples and seek to obscure the real cause.

A solution must begin with self-determination for the Kurds

Focus narrowly on Saddam's war against the Kurds, and you may think that the request for military and political intervention by the West sounds fair enough. But put the conflict in the wider context of the oppressive relationship between Western imperialism and the Middle East, and the dangers of this approach should become clear. The call for US intervention ignores the fact that, not only has the USA already intervened (its army of occupation was still in southern Iraq as the Kurds suffered in the north), but that its intervention was responsible for the disaster.

Are we really to believe that the cause of the crisis can also be the solution to it? That the poison can also be the antidote? That the same US firepower which a few weeks earlier burnt thousands of ordinary Iraqis to a crisp on the Basra road can suddenly become an instrument of humanitarian justice for the Kurds?

A solution to the Kurdish tragedy must begin with self-determination for the Kurds. That means freedom not just from Saddam but from all of the regimes which keep the Kurdish masses under the heel. There is no point in looking to the imperialist powers to deliver self-determination. The West and its local allies are responsible for putting the Kurds in their present dire position.

There is a long history of the Western powers manipulating Kurdish aspirations for freedom. During the First World War, for example, the British and the French encouraged the idea of a separate Kurdish homeland to put pressure on the Ottoman Empire, which was fighting on the side of Germany. In the post-war years, however, when the British and French broke up the Ottoman Empire and drew the map of the modern Middle East, they ignored the claims of the Kurds in favour of sheikhs and sultans whom they saw as reliable stooges.

statement of the Kurds

When the boundaries of the Middle Eastern states were finally settled by the Western powers, what should have been Kurdistan was divided up and parcelled out between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.

The Western imperialists invented, and still sponsor, the system of Middle Eastern states which has denied the Kurds their freedom. In the interests of keeping that system stable, the West has consistently allowed its client regimes to repress the Kurds at will.

Through the eighties, when Saddam Hussein was an ally of the USA, he pursued his anti-Kurdish pogroms while Washington lent him millions and Western firms supplied him with chemical weapons. Turkey, now a member of the Nato alliance, has an equally brutal record of persecuting the Kurds. Until recently, the Kurdish language was outlawed in Turkey. Even as Washington and Whitehall condemned Saddam's latest attacks on the Kurds, the forces of their Nato ally were opening fire on Kurdish protesters in Turkey. And Kurds who have fled to Britain from Iraq, Iran or Turkey in recent years have often faced police harassment and deportation back to the Middle East at the hands of the British authorities.

The idea that the USA and the West should act as the saviours of the Kurds is a sick joke. Any intervention on this issue by the Western powers, such as John Major's proposal to partition Iraq 'temporarily', will be designed only to increase their own control over the peoples of the region. Far from more Western interference, the precondition for Kurdish self-determination is the removal of Western imperialism and all of the repressive regimes which it spawns from the Middle East.

The widespread confusion over the cause of the Kurdish tragedy is leading to a dangerous situation today. The loudest calls for American intervention in Iraq now seem to be coming from those who opposed the Gulf War in the first place. The fact that even the liberal critics of that war are demanding more Western militarism gives the British and American authorities increased moral authority to interfere in the third world. Whatever happens this time, it gives them a useful card to play in justifying future imperialist adventures. Next time questions are raised about an aggressive Western intervention, they need only ask, 'Remember what happened to the Kurds when we didn't finish off Saddam?', and most of their critics will be silenced.

The idea that the USA should act as the saviour of the Kurds is a sick joke

Thus the Kurdish tragedy, which ought to be an occasion for exposing the bloody consequences of a US-British colonial war in the third world, is in danger of being turned into an advert for extending the reach of Western imperialism.

Living Marxism has consistently opposed every aspect of Western interference in the Middle East, from sanctions to air-strikes. In the Gulf War we sided with the Iraqis. We certainly had no illusions about Saddam Hussein; unlike the British and US governments, we have never supported his despotic regime and have always backed Kurdish self-determination. Our support for Iraq against the US-led alliance was based on the simple understanding that Western imperialism is the central problem facing the peoples of the Middle East. It is the same understanding which now leads us to demand self-determination for the Kurds, and to oppose any call for further Western interference in the region.

The Kurdish question, like the Palestinian question, will have to be resolved by the peoples of the Middle East, in the struggle to rid themselves of the Saddams, the Saudi sheikhs, the Turkish generals and all of the other dictators made in the West. The best thing we can do to help is to raise the demand for the British and US imperialists to stop interfering in Middle Eastern affairs, even if they do it behind the banners of the United Nations. The fact that it was John Major who exploited the plight of the Kurds in order to suggest carving up Iraq should provide a timely reminder for us: there is no more important place than Britain in which to take a stand against imperialism, especially when it tries to operate under the guise of humanitarian concern for the oppressed.

Photo: Stephen Clark

From Grenada to Panama and Iraq

The West always makes it worse

The US and British governments claimed that their invasion of the Gulf would be for the good of the Iraqi people. Yet their intervention left Iraq in ruins: hundreds of thousands died in the bombing, many more were left to face hunger and disease, and then came the bloody civil war. Nor are the Iraqis and Kurds the first third world peoples to reap such benefits from Western intervention. Andy Clarkson and Kunle Oluremi look back at the bitter recent experience of Grenada and Panama

Western rulers always justify their invasions of third world countries on highly moral grounds, suggesting that they are helping to restore freedom and democracy and promising a better future for people living in poverty and servitude. In practice, however bad a third world regime might be, the intervention of US, British or other Western forces has invariably brought more misery and suffering to the country on the receiving end.

The USA invaded the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983 and the Central American state of Panama in 1989, each time on the pretext of dealing with local dictators. Today you would be hard put to find anybody in the slums of Panama City or St George's with a good word for their American 'liberators'. In both countries democracy is a sham, military terror the norm, death squads roam the streets, poverty is endemic and pleas for relief aid are spurned in the West. As one Washington official said of Grenada after the 1983 invasion, 'It is now sinking gradually into the oblivion we reserve for our friends'.

Grenada 1983-91

On October 25 1983, 3000 US marines and paratroopers stormed the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. The invasion was the culmination of a relentless escalation of US pressure. Washington had invented a triangle of communist subversion, supposedly involving Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada under the radical government of Maurice Bishop's New Jewel Movement, in order to justify its increasingly bellicose posture in the region. When leading members of the New Jewel Movement carried out a coup resulting in Bishop's death, America seized its opportunity to invade. Grenada's small militia was steamrollered by the invading army, which was backed up by naval frigates, fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships equipped with state-of-the-art military technology.

After the invasion, in 1984, Herbert Blaize's New National Party came top of the poll in elections which could hardly be said to have heralded a new dawn for democracy in Grenada. Former Reagan aide Morton C Blackwell was drafted in to advise the party, whose campaign was heavily funded by American

conservatives. The presence of US troops ensured that votes were cast in an atmosphere of intimidation. Once the Americans had got the result they wanted, the troops were withdrawn. But to be on the safe side, Washington drafted US-trained officers into the local police force. Grenada's trade unions were reorganised to ensure their new leaders were solidly pro-American.

The 1983 coup leaders Bernard and Phylis Coard were held without trial for three years. In October 1986, they and 12 others were sentenced to death. They are still awaiting the outcome of their appeal. Held in solitary confinement, Phylis Coard went on hunger-strike for two weeks in July 1990 to protest at sexual harassment by prison guards.

The New Jewel Movement is still suffering the consequences of the American invasion, and so is the entire population of Grenada. In 1985, the US-controlled parliament introduced a Restriction of Movement Act to prevent political opponents moving in and out of the island. That was followed in June 1986 with draconian legislation giving the security forces new powers of arrest, detention, curfew and interference in trade union affairs. When Ronald Reagan visited the country that year, the poorest parts of the capital were singled out for repression: 'Police and special service units arrested 25 people in a raid on a poor area in St George's because an anti-Reagan poster was prominently displayed as part of a protest against the visit. The police beat their prisoners and demolished several wooden shacks.' (J Ferguson, *Revolution in Reverse,* p105)

Unemployment in Grenada has risen from 14 per cent under the Bishop regime to 40 per cent today. Once it had spent the $18.5m aid it received from Capitol Hill repairing the damage caused by the invasion, the impoverished Caribbean island didn't get another cent from the USA. The tourist trade never recovered from the invasion and the economy has collapsed. In 1988, the trade deficit stood at 20 per cent of export earnings, up from four per cent in 1980. Of 100 investment projects promised in the aftermath of the invasion, not one has come to fruition.

In December 1989, the Blaize regime provoked an indefinite strike by three of the island's seven unions by reneging on a backpay deal. Grenada was paralysed and Blaize was forced to back down. He died soon afterwards and his government was replaced in 1990. The hatred that every Grenadian feels for the USA was exposed earlier this year, when Washington launched its air war against Iraq. It rapidly became clear that Saddam had become one of the most popular men in Grenada. Even the right-wing *Grenadian Voice* had to concede that 'there seemed to be a fair amount of sympathy for the Iraqi cause' (19 January 1991).

Panama 1989-91

The USA claimed that it invaded Panama in December 1989 to arrest one man, General Manuel Antonio Noriega, and restore democracy in Panama. In the process US forces killed at least 2500 people during the assault on the working class *barrio* of El Chorrillo in Panama City. Members of the 193rd US infantry brigade told author Godfrey Harris that they loaded 'hundreds and hundreds' of body bags on to cargo planes which were 'transported for clandestine burial at an American airbase in Honduras' (*The Nation,* 4 February 1991).

After the invasion, the US embassy became the de facto government of Panama. US assistant secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger told reporters that 'the US government plans to be actively engaged with the new Panamanian leadership'. 'Active engagement' meant the creation of a parallel government composed of 31 US military and civilian officials attached to all 12 Panamanian ministries and five other government institutions.

USA rules, OK

US control extends throughout every city and town. In July 1990, Noriega's former employers, the CIA, helped set up a new Panamanian secret service, the council for public security and national defence. It is headed by Menalco Solis, a US-educated lawyer who served under Noriega.

The new 13 000-strong Panamanian police force consists almost entirely of 'Dobermans', Noriega's old outfit. According to US human rights organisation Americas Watch, the new police force 'have already started arresting people without warrant or due process and bringing them in for secret interrogation'. One police chief, Colonel Eduardo Herrera, has organised two coup attempts against the stooge government of Guillermo Endara, installed by the Americans immediately after the invasion, which were put down after the deployment of US troops from their Canal Zone bases.

According to the Latin America Bureau, drug-running has *increased* since the invasion and president Endara, vice president Ricardo Calderon and planning minister Guillermo Ford are all implicated in the racketeering. The US authorities have never been seriously interested in stopping Latin American drug-running; indeed, the CIA has often organised it. Instead, Washington has used the hyped-up 'war against drugs' as a pretext for pressurising states like Panama. It used drug-running as a pretext to invade Panama. Now it is using drugs as an excuse to avoid paying out aid which it never intended to give in the first place. The US congress promised $420m to Panama, but now says it won't pay unless US narcotic agencies can investigate bank accounts in Panama. So far congress has given $120m (£62m) to the country which it laid to waste under the banner of democracy.

Since the invasion, Panama's GDP has recovered by six per cent, peanuts given that it fell 30 per cent under the embargo imposed by George Bush prior to the invasion. Panama's hopes of obtaining $2 billion in reconstruction aid have faded. The Panamanian working class has borne the brunt of the US occupation. Eighteen months after the devastation of El Chorrillo, thousands are still homeless. Panama's poor have increased from a third of the 2.4m population before the US embargo and invasion to a half today.

In the new year, *Newsweek* revealed that senior Pentagon officers were discussing whether to rescind the 1978 Canal treaty, in which the USA agreed to vacate the Canal Zone by the year 2000 (14 January). Meanwhile, the US army is still patrolling Panama's Darien Gap border with Colombia to 'catch drug-traffickers'. In these conditions it is scarcely surprising that Endara's ruling ADOC coalition has broken up amid bitter recriminations and the left-wing Colina coalition, which formerly backed Noriega, is winning every poll. That's what the people of Panama think of Bush's new world order.

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unemployment

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after the gulf

When the Gulf crisis began the experts tried to blame it for the recession in the West; when it ended they claimed that victory would stop the economic slump. They were wrong both times.
Phil Murphy draws up a balance sheet of the economic consequences of the war for the Western powers, especially the USA and Britain

The economics of war

The speedy end of the land war in the Gulf encouraged a wave of optimism about economic prospects on both sides of the Atlantic. Earlier fears that the Gulf crisis would exacerbate the West's economic troubles were reversed in the post-war euphoria. Federal reserve chief Alan Greenspan in America and CBI director general John Banham in Britain were both quick to predict that the end of the war would boost consumer and business confidence and strengthen the predicted economic recovery. In his first budget speech, Tory chancellor Norman Lamont took much the same line.

The post-war predictions of an escape from crisis contrast sharply with the earlier warnings that war would bring economic doom. Between the start of the Gulf crisis in August and the defeat of Iraq at the

end of February, many commentators argued that the war had either caused or seriously aggravated the West's economic problems. The *Daily Telegraph* summed up the mood, speaking of 'legitimate concern that the cost of the conflict will deepen the present recession, lower living standards and ruin government finances' (28 January 1991).

Straw men

The wartime pessimists and the post-war optimists derive from the same school. Their instincts tell them correctly that the 1980s boom is over. But neither can explain (let alone arrest) what is happening. So they set up a range of Gulf-related straw men to explain the recession—oil price rises, uncertainty, lack of confidence—and then, when the US-led invasion had crushed Iraq, they knocked all of their straw men down. The reality is, however, that the wishful thinking about a victory-inspired upturn is as ill-founded and exaggerated as the earlier attempts to blame the war for the economic crisis. A major crisis like the Gulf War inevitably has an impact upon the Western economies. But the attempts to establish a cause-effect relationship between war and recession obscure the independent forces driving the capitalist system into a slump.

Today all the talk is of the beneficial impact of the war on business and consumer 'confidence'. No doubt great events like wars do influence people's outlook on life and their mood. The question is, however, how can such confidence influence real economic activity? Confidence alone doesn't put money in our pockets to buy consumer goods and boost domestic demand. Confidence doesn't give businessmen the funds and profit-inspired motivation to undertake productive investment. The fact that analysts are focusing on such an ephemeral factor as 'confidence', rather than on more tangible things like capital investment, reveals an underlying weakness in the world economy which has nothing to do with the Gulf War.

Credit mountains

Over the past two decades the trend towards declining profitability has made the capitalist world more reliant on making money through unproductive financial dealings, instead of through industry making and selling products. The provision of mountains of credit to companies and consumers has become an essential feature of this modern economy, especially in the declining economies like the USA and Britain. And because credit-fuelled activity is not immediately dependent upon the production of real wealth, non-economic factors like confidence can play a greater role. This explains why stock markets, the classical indicators of confidence, could rise rapidly in response to Western success in the Gulf. 'Confidence' and credit could push up company share prices without there being any improvement in the economic fundamentals. Indeed the markets rose at a time when all the serious economic projections indicated the recession was getting deeper.

Confidence matters in a world where being an economic success means making paper money out of shuffling shares and bonds around in the market. But confidence does not cause or overcome recessionary trends. The question of confidence comes to prominence in economic debate only because the capitalist system is trying to compensate for its deep-seated problems of profitability through insubstantial financial speculation. The succession of financial, banking and credit-related crises since the crash of October 1987 is testimony to the limitations of this type of speculative activity. Confidence—affected by war, the weather or anything else—can make a difference only until this increasingly shaky set-up collapses.

Rewriting history

Trying to blame the development of the recession on the impact of the war also involves falsifying history. Recessionary tendencies were evident well before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The slowdown in the pace of economic activity began in the USA and Britain in 1988. The British recession started during the second quarter of 1990, when Iraq was still a friend of the West. Even the government's economic report accompanying the recent budget had to admit that manufacturing output, business investment and company profits began to fall from March 1990, at the same time as official unemployment figures first showed an increase.

The movement from recession to slump was on the cards long before the Gulf crisis. Its immediate roots lay in the superficial character of the expansion of the 1980s. Saturation news coverage of the war obscured the speed with which the recession was getting wider and deeper. Over the last three months, international capitalism has moved beyond the stage of just another cyclical recession and entered the prelude to world slump.

In Britain companies are collapsing and unemployment rising faster than at any time since the Second World War. Within a year, all the supposed economic gains of the Thatcher decade have been reversed. Many of the new businesses financed by easy credit policies, which created the eighties aura of revival and dynamism, have failed to outlive the decade; 24 000 collapsed last year. In the last recession in the early eighties, unemployment took five years to reach 3m; in this depression the real jobless total might be close to that figure in just 18 months.

Recession spreads

The British recession may have struck first at the more fly-by-night service sector in the south-east, hitting estate agents, advertisers, architects, retailers, and some City whiz-kids. But it has now spread both geographically and sectorally. Around 100 000 jobs are expected to go in construction; 50 000 have gone in engineering, many from supposedly world-class companies—Jaguar, British Aerospace, Rover, Rolls Royce; 30 000 jobs are to go in the big high-street banks, at the heart of Britain's financial sector; 25 000 jobs are to go in textiles. The list of big and famous firms hit by the recession lengthens every day.

America is in recession too. Industrial production has been falling since October. Three quarters of a million manufacturing jobs have gone in 12 months. On top of the businesses going bust, more than a million individuals were declared bankrupt in the USA last year. The rate of return on American investments began to decline again in the middle of 1988, while company profits have been falling absolutely for two years. Most significantly for the future, real capital investment is falling with little prospect of an upturn. The slump in profits is the decisive factor depriving capitalists of both the means and incentive to invest.

The knock-on effect of the US recession aggravates the domestic difficulties facing the two most dynamic economic powers, Germany and Japan. Neither faces immediate recession, but their growth is getting more sluggish. In Germany the burden of the costs arising from German reunification is compounded by declining export markets. In January, falling exports helped push the German current account into the red for the first time since August 1985.

If the Japanese are nervous about their fragile financial system, they are more worried still about international trends. Problems in the USA and other overseas markets mean that

Japan's capital investment growth this year will be a tenth of what it was in 1990. The Nomura Research Institute forecasts that profits will fall by almost a tenth this year. Output is being cut back in the crucial car plants, which account for 10 per cent of the Japanese economy and set the pace for the rest of industry.

Against this backdrop of global tendencies towards depression, what has the real impact of the Gulf War been? We can consider this question under several headings: oil, war-affected services, construction, military production, and state spending.

The war-related effects on the world oil price were overstated, as was the impact of oil price volatility on the international economy. Compared to a decade ago oil, and Middle East oil in particular, is relatively less important for the capitalist world's energy needs. This is due to energy diversification and the development of other oil resources.

Predictions that the oil price would rise to $50, even $100 a barrel, in the event of war were never realised. Among oil economists concern soon focused on an oil glut rather than a shortage. When the shooting war began oil prices plunged from $30 to $20 a barrel. More than enough oil was being produced outside Iraq and Kuwait to meet world demand for the foreseeable future. And the strategic oil reserves held by the main capitalist powers were large enough to make good any temporary disruption, even to Saudi production. Between them the American, German and Japanese governments have more than a billion barrels of oil in reserve—equivalent to about one third of total annual Saudi production.

With post-war prices being within a few dollars of last summer's level, the war cannot have much impact on the world economy through oil. The irony is that most of the post-war concern about oil has come from US producers who worry that world prices are now too *low* to make their operations profitable.

The war did harm some service industries in the Western economies. Tourism plunged. London travel agents, hotels and London theatres reported bookings down by up to 60 per cent. Airlines were hit as holiday and business travel fell, with traffic through Heathrow and Gatwick down by a quarter during the first two weeks of the war. British Airways announced large-scale redundancies and encouraged staff to take unpaid leave while the war lasted. A week after the war ended, the receivers were called in at Air Europe. But while the war may have pushed some operators over the brink, slowdown tendencies in these service sectors were evident well before the Gulf crisis began.

Some service sectors have been adversely affected by war, but other parts of the Western economy will benefit. The construction industry will be a gainer. Although the cost of rebuilding Kuwait has been massively inflated in press reports, those companies that get the contracts will find the rewards lucrative. The scramble for contracts will favour companies from combatant countries and those who built the destroyed plant in the first place.

Blood money

The US army corps of engineers quickly awarded contracts for $46m worth of emergency work, mainly to US corporations, and to one British company. The US giant Betchel has the management contract for the reconstruction of the Kuwaiti oil industry. Raytheon, the US manufacturer of the Patriot missile, was predictably awarded one of the first contracts, a $5.7m deal to restore lighting, communications and air-traffic control at the international airport. All three Detroit car manufacturers have got contracts worth more than $10m each. America's General Electric has a 40 per cent stake in the contract signed by Ericsson of Sweden for a multi-million dollar mobile land communications system. The French defence electronics company Thomson-CSF has a similar sized contract for a mobile TV broadcasting system. The Gulf reconstruction contracts are a big prize for hard-pressed building companies and related producers and suppliers, such as engineers and architects.

Extra military spending could be a bigger stimulus. Many leading manufacturing companies, especially in Britain and the USA, have been dependent on government defence handouts for years. Even before the shooting war began, additional arms production prevented industrial output falling even faster in Britain and the USA in the final quarter of 1990. Ammunition and lost equipment could cost up to £2 billion in Britain. For the US authorities the cost of replacing equipment and munitions might be only $5 billion, since they were able to take advantage of the high military stockpiles built up in the eighties. Recession-hit American manufacturers will find this new defence spending useful but limited. However, many of them are looking beyond this to the prospect of much bigger export orders being signed around the world. The war provided a huge shop window for displaying the best examples of US and British military hardware, now with the priceless 'battle-proven' tag attached.

No peace dividend

The Gulf is likely to have a broader impact on military spending, especially in the USA, by undermining the psychology of a post-Cold War peace dividend. Some defence cuts will be postponed and cancelled. The experience of war will tend to prioritise the production of 'smart' weapons, accelerating research and development expenditure on hi-tech weaponry. Even the multi-billion dollar Star Wars project is now being vigorously championed in Washington as necessary to defend Europe and America, not from Soviet missiles, but from third world nuclear proliferators.

The redistribution of the US and

The wishful thinking about a victory-inspired upturn is as ill-founded and exaggerated as the earlier attempts to blame the war for the economic crisis

British defence budgets towards productive (equipment) rather than unproductive (manpower) expenditure could give a short-term boost to some industries. The post-Gulf lesson being expounded by military experts in Britain and the USA is the need for 'leaner and meaner' fighting machines. Smaller, but mobile and better equipped, forces are the order of the day. This means less spending on wages and some strategic weapons systems, more spending on conventional and hi-tech weapons, and on air and sea transport to move troops and equipment around the third world.

Weapons of destruction

It is a telling comment on the condition of transatlantic capitalism today that the industries with the best prospects are those producing weapons of destruction. However, even the benefits of military spending should not be exaggerated. British and American weapons manufacturers have been in long-term decline. Even as the equipment replacement costs of the Gulf War were being totted up, more defence manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic were announcing cuts and redundancies. New equipment orders can slow the collapse but are unlikely to reverse it.

And what of the war's impact on government spending plans? Latest estimates put the total cost to the British government at £3 billion and $40 billion to the USA. These may sound like huge sums, but they have been described as a 'flea bite' and 'affordable' respectively. The short duration of the land war might reduce even these estimates. City economist Tim Congdon has argued that £3 billion only represents 'the kind of error which governments make in their forecasting', and will have 'a relatively minor effect on the economy'. The $40 billion cost to the US budget is much bigger, but is put in perspective when we recall that the US treasury is spending up to $500 billion bailing out the insolvent Savings and Loans institutions (building societies). In any case, the war costs could be more than halved by contributions promised from Germany, Japan and the Gulf states.

A balance sheet

Overall there has been a tendency among economic commentators to overstate both the negative impact of the war and the positive impact of the post-war situation. On balance the positive stimulus given by war-related expenditure may slightly slow down the recession; but it certainly won't halt the slide.

There is one way in which the war could more broadly influence the evolution of international slump tendencies. The revival of US militarism in the Gulf was largely a consequence of its relative economic decline. Washington elevated the local Iraq-Kuwait dispute into a global crisis and intervened militarily as a show of America's continued world leadership. In particular, the USA aimed to assert its authority over its major rivals, Japan and Germany, by pressing them to support and subsidise Washington in its role as world policeman. America's Gulf success can help to keep the US-led Western Alliance together for now, and to sustain the post-1945 mechanisms of international economic cooperation. This could allow the USA to export some of its economic problems, getting Japan and Germany to continue financing its enormous budget and trade deficits.

Thieves fall out

Over the past year the system of international economic cooperation has seemed to be nearing a breakdown as America, Europe and Japan fell out over everything from interest rates to agricultural exports. If victory in the Gulf gives the USA the global leverage to keep its Western rivals in line a little longer, it could have important consequences for the world economy. International economic cooperation has provided the basis for every survival mechanism employed by the capitalist powers over the last 20 years of crisis. Within the political framework provided by American leadership, the top capitalist nations worked together to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis. They extended credit, deregulated lucrative financial operations and internationalised capital flows. These measures minimised the consequences of the structural weakness of world capitalism. If the outcome of the Gulf crisis prolongs the system of cooperation, America could reap the short-term benefits.

Anything which postpones the day when Germany and Japan adopt more independent economic policies is to the advantage of the USA. The boost to America's global standing provided by the Gulf War has already temporarily enhanced its negotiating position with its major competitors. Thus Washington once more has the upper hand in the resumed Gatt talks over world trade. Japan is expected to acquiesce to US demands that it extend the five-year old deal on trade in semiconductors, which artificially boosts American exports to the Japanese market. The government in Tokyo even instructed Japanese firms not to bid for Gulf reconstruction work, for fear of offending the Americans.

These measures assist America's attempt to manage its decline in world markets. But they cannot reverse that decline. The poor international competitiveness of US industry is a deeply rooted problem, stemming from the long-term slippage in its rates of productivity growth. In all major sectors America has continued to lose ground to its competitors, despite its political manipulation of trade arrangements. For example, Washington's pressurised deals with Japan over semiconductors have not stopped the US share of the world market being halved from the 80 per cent it had a decade ago. In steel production, cars and machine tools the trends are all the same. Last year even Switzerland overtook the USA in the machine tool market.

America's success in the Gulf can only postpone the inevitable breakdown in international economic cooperation. Today the USA can claim to be the unchallenged number one once more, but this time it lacks the stable and strong economy required to back up its pretensions. During the Gulf crisis, the US world policeman had to go around the world demanding hand-outs from other powers, looking more like a protection racketeer than an altruistic defender of the Free World. Washington had better make the most of its moment of glory, because as its economic position worsens it will not find the Germans and Japanese so compliant in the future.

Fortress Britain

The political repercussions of the Gulf War have economic consequences for Britain too. The British economy has long since lost the ability to survive on its own industry, and become increasingly dependent on the City of London's lucrative participation in financial operations tied to international economic cooperation. If economic cooperation survives a bit longer, so will the role of the City. Indeed Britain is the capitalist nation with most to gain from the elevation of militarism in international relations. Military matters are just about the only ones in which Whitehall still commands respect overseas, and the government wants to milk this for every penny it is worth. No wonder British capitalists so enjoyed making war in the Gulf; it temporarily distracted attention from the fact that they are no longer any good at making anything else.

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The detector

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then and now

May 1981—the death of Bobby Sands

Hunger-strikers

It is 10 years since Bobby Sands became the first of 10 Irish republican prisoners to die on a hunger-strike in support of their demand for political status. It was the event which, more than any other, has shaped the last decade of the Irish conflict, both inside the prisons and out.

We spoke to two former hunger-strikers about the situation then and now. Joe Boatman and Alex Campbell went into the jail where the 10 men died, to meet Ray McCartney, now officer commanding the IRA and other republican prisoners. Fiona Foster met Pat McGeown, who today is the Sinn Fein organiser in Northern Ireland

When Bobby Sands died on 5 May 1981 in the H-Blocks of the Maze Prison, after 66 days on hunger-strike, he had the distinction of being a member of both the Irish Republican Army and the Westminster parliament. Sands had begun the hunger-strike on 1 March 1981 in an effort to force the British government to concede that he and his republican comrades were political prisoners. He had been elected MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone on 9 April 1981, by 30 000 Irish nationalists who sent Whitehall a simple message: that in their eyes, IRA volunteer Bobby Sands was no criminal.

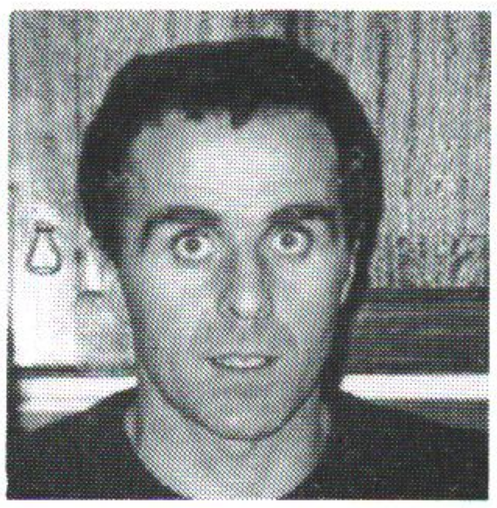
The Tory government led by Margaret Thatcher refused to concede the prisoners' demands for political status, which had been withdrawn by the previous Labour government in 1976. After Sands, nine other young hunger-strikers died in the H-Blocks: Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, Mickey Devine. It is a measure of their commitment that, if those 10 men had accepted the label 'criminal', and meekly served their time, they would not just have been alive today; all of them

except Francis Hughes would have been released from jail several years ago.

The hunger-strike ended in October 1981, having failed to secure its demands. But it had a dramatic impact on the struggle in Northern Ireland. The determination of the republican prisoners galvanised support outside the H-Blocks. The nationalist community rallied once more to the republican cause. A hundred thousand marched behind Sands' coffin, and his election agent Owen Carron was elected as MP in his place with an increased majority. Encouraged by this success, Sinn Fein began standing candidates in elections from 1982, winning thousands of votes on a platform of supporting the armed struggle and abstaining from British parliaments. The hunger-strike and its aftermath thus struck a blow against the British government's attempt to portray the IRA as a small criminal conspiracy without support. The British authorities have spent the past 10 years trying to regain lost ground, and drive the republican movement back to the political margins.

Britain's containment strategy over the past decade has involved intensified repression against republicans (from the renewed shoot-to-kill campaign and the mass arrests on the word of 'supergrasses', to the broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein), alongside attempts to promote the moderate nationalism of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) (most notably through the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985, with its empty promise of peaceful progress). Ten years on, the strategy seems to be bearing fruit. Tory Northern Ireland secretary Peter Brooke has announced a new round of talks between the SDLP, the Unionist parties, Dublin and Whitehall, while Sinn Fein's electoral support has recently been reduced to a hard core. The political pendulum which swung in favour of the republicans a decade ago now seems to have turned once more in the British government's favour.

The experience of the hunger-strike, however, provides some important lessons for anybody who might believe that Britain has won the Irish War. The hunger-strike itself was a desperate response to the earlier success of the British policy of criminalisation in isolating the IRA. Its impact proved once more that, however successfully British policy is packaged, sooner or later colonial interference in Ireland provokes a new round of resistance. Even when it appears that everything is against those struggling for Irish self-determination, a minority will continue to stand up and fight. The hunger-strikers demonstrated that in the most dramatic fashion 10 years ago; the IRA volunteers of today continue in their tradition. The spectre of Bobby Sands haunts the British establishment still.



Raymond McCartney

'We're political prisoners'

Raymond McCartney was waiting at the table in booth 20 in the visiting room of HM Prison the Maze, the highest security British jail which is still known to Irish nationalists as Long Kesh internment camp. We weren't allowed to bring anything in for him, but he had cans of drink and chocolate for us from the prisoners' collective shop (he joked that he'd be claiming expenses).

The news on everybody's lips was the release of the Birmingham Six. 'Yes, that was a bit of good news alright', said McCartney, 'But I think some of their campaigners made a mistake in not broadening out the campaign to deal with the wider political issues'.

McCartney has no doubt that those who died on hunger-strike have been vindicated. 'Of course we regret that 10 men had to die, but they knew, better than anybody, what they were fighting for, what they were doing when they laid down their lives.' McCartney put his own life on the line in the first hunger-strike at the end of 1980, fasting for 53 days before that strike was ended by a false promise of concessions from the Northern Ireland office (NIO).

The second hunger-strike ended in October 1981, and the NIO never did concede political status. But, insists McCartney, 'we've won the arguments and we've forced them to implement our demands'. While the British authorities continue to tell the world that Irish republicans are criminals and terrorists, the prisoners argue that, in everything but name, the state has conceded the five demands around which the hunger-strikes were organised. Republicans do not wear prison uniform. They are segregated from Loyalist prisoners. They do no prison work; that was brought to a spectacular halt in 1983, when 38 republican prisoners went over the wall, and the rest were confined to their wings.

'Bobby Sands said prison is a breaker's yard, designed to break you', says McCartney. 'We have to break the breaker's yard, turn it into a builder's yard.' We had heard the Maze called a 'school for terrorists'. McCartney laughed: 'We prefer to call it "The University of Freedom".' Republican prisoners spend a lot of time reading and discussing. While they rely on visitors and new men coming in for 'news from the street', McCartney reckons that they're better informed on world events than most people outside.

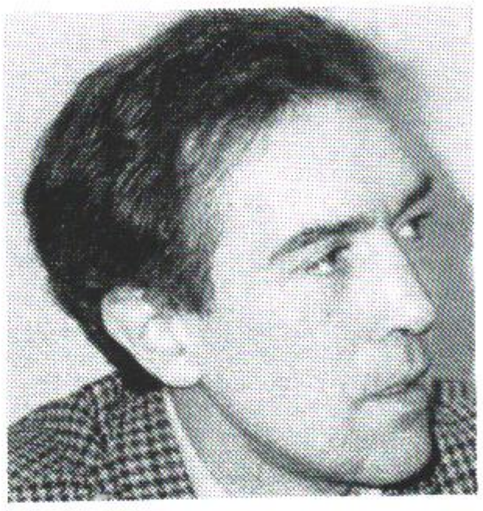
From 8.30 in the morning until 8.30 at night the prisoners run the wings. The farce of the afternoon lock-ups shows how the NIO attempts the pretence that this is a conventional prison regime. Regulations say men should be locked up for two and a half hours each afternoon and, sure enough, the warders do lock up the cells. But nobody is in the locked cells; all of the 20 or so men on each wing are assembled either in the canteen or the double cell used for meetings. Although the prison authorities 'would like to control every aspect of our lives', McCartney says, 'they consult us about everything. They even come to us with their personal problems...because they haven't got any friends!'.

Whatever compromises they might make inside the prisons, however, outside the British authorities still maintain what McCartney and his comrades call 'the big lie', that jailed republicans are simply criminals and not political prisoners. 'To concede that we're political prisoners would

be to admit that there's a political basis to the whole situation in Ireland.'

British policy has evolved since 1981, and now combines hammering dedicated republicans with cosmetic attempts to 'normalise' the situation for other nationalists. 'For example, they may say 10 years is no longer a deterrent, they'll give someone 20 years.' Meanwhile, prisoners whom they think might be won away from republicanism are offered enticements to serve their sentence in Maghaberry, where they'll be given better educational and sanitary conditions in return for obeying prison rules.

McCartney sees the scheme which allows lifers to go home for four days each summer and six over Christmas as another attempt to defuse the prison issue. 'I think it is part of the policy of trying to neutralise Sinn Fein, but while the censorship has had some effect the scheme of letting lifers out has had none.' The experience of a few days at home has certainly not swayed Raymond McCartney from the cause for which he went on hunger-strike a decade ago. With 13 years in jail behind him and no release date ahead, his determination remains impressive. 'I have an analysis of the situation, that the problems will only be resolved when Ireland is united and the Irish people have self-determination. So why not do today what'll have to be done tomorrow?'



Pat McGeown

'They can do no more to us'

When Pat McGeown first went to prison in 1975 for bombing Belfast's Europa Hotel, he was classified as a special category (that is, political) prisoner, allowed to wear his own clothes, exempted from prison work and segregated from other prisoners. 'The Labour government's attempt to criminalise the republican struggle by withdrawing political status in 1976 meant that overnight I became an ordinary criminal to the prison authorities.'

McGeown was officer commanding of the IRA prisoners in his H-Block when the British authorities failed to keep the promise of concessions which had ended the first hunger-strike in 1980. 'On Christmas Eve I got a message from Bobby Sands asking me to prepare for a second hunger-strike. I was amongst 20 in my block who volunteered. Bobby argued that he should lead the hunger-strike because his views were so well known that when he could no longer articulate them we'd still know what they were.'

The decision to stand Sands in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election was a key development. 'We knew that, whether or not he won, Bobby Sands would get enough votes to show the world that far from being isolated criminals, republicans are seen as political hostages in a war of liberation.' The prisoners heard about Sands' victory before their jailers. 'We weren't allowed radio or TV but we had a couple of tiny radios smuggled in so when the news came through that Bobby was elected the blocks just exploded.' Sands himself urged caution amidst the jubilation. As the hunger-strike hit the international headlines, the British government raised the stakes. Margaret Thatcher declared that this was no prison dispute but a major battle between the IRA and the British government in which concessions could not be contemplated.

The same illicit radios that had brought news of Sands' victory conveyed the news of his death. 'It silenced us, drained us. Obviously you know death is a possibility, but it's not the aim. The aim is to win, to avoid death, and that's what you keep in mind, so Bobby's death was somehow a terrible shock.' The government maintained its ruthless attitude as Francis Hughes, Patsy O'Hara and Ray McCreesh died. The NIO let the prisoners know that there were ways of resolving their specific demands, but only once they accepted political defeat: 'The demands it seemed were not an issue, the sticking point was that the British government had to be seen to have conceded nothing.'

Pat McGeown joined the hunger-strike after the death of the fifth man, Joe McDonnell, on 8 July 1981. 'It was a hard time to start, to have the strength you needed to see some way of winning. But I had no real problem with it.' He was moved into the prison hospital after catching a cold. 'I remember Tom McElwee lying dying, asking were we banging our head against a brick wall. I said we had to keep going. The next night he was dead.'

After 30 to 40 days on hunger-strike, the men's speech slowed, their hearing deteriorated, and their eyes began to move involuntarily. Days before the parliamentary by-election caused by Sands' death, both Pat McGeown and Mickey Devine entered that stage. 'You knew someone was about to die if his family were brought in. I remember waking to hear Mickey's family in the corridor. When I woke again the prison chaplain was telling me that Mickey had just died. I was shattered.' Later that day Pat's own family were brought in and he slipped into a coma. His family requested that he be given medication. 'When I woke up in intensive care the first person I saw was a nurse from Fermanagh who told me that Owen Carron had won the by-election with an increased majority.' But the British government still would not be swayed. The Catholic Church pressurised more families to administer medication to the unconscious men. The prisoners ended their hunger-strike.

For Pat McGeown there is no easy answer to who won the 1981 hunger-strike. 'In a narrow sense the British won because we were forced to give in. In a broader way we made major gains. The support we won gave the lie to the image of republicans as isolated criminals. It changed us from hot-headed young men involved in the struggle as a reaction to British violence, into committed activists aware of the strength of our enemy. The fact that we've been so close to death means they can do no more to us. Once you let them know that they can't frighten you, that not even death frightens you, it blunts every weapon they've got.'

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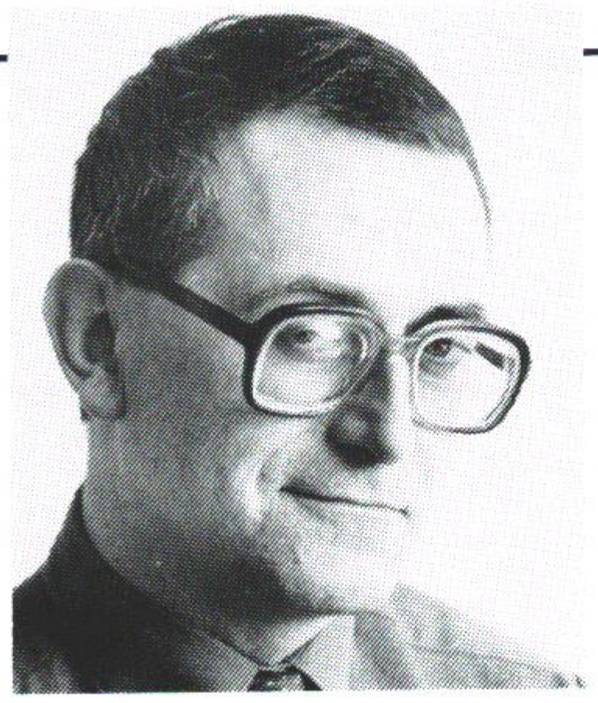

Don Milligan

Don't listen to your heart!

'Listen to your heart' is the UK entry to the Eurovision song contest in Rome in May. It won 108 000 votes in the British tele-ballot. That's 10 000 more than its nearest rival. Sung by four 'leggy girls' with hearts as big as dinner plates and grins as wide as saucers, it's about famine, greed and the Grace of God. The world is split in two: the losers live in the hungry half; the winners live in the greedy half. According to these eager songsters destitution is merely a poignant sign of the fate that befalls the unfortunate. The road to salvation lies in listening to your heart. It's a simple message delivered with the measured enthusiasm of a kissogram. Predictably, I thought it lacked taste and voted for 'True love', a sensitive ballad that came close to last. I was gutted. I just felt so unlucky. Perhaps if more people had been watching or if Terry Wogan had been a bit more biased 'True love' might have come through. But as things turned out, it just didn't have a chance. You do your best to analyse and understand, to anticipate and prepare, and then *bingo!*, fate takes over. It made me think how odd and unpredictable things can be.

'Que sera, sera' may be good enough for Doris Day, but personally, I've always felt that fate could do with a helping hand. When I spill salt I ritually throw some over my shoulder. I can never remember which shoulder, so to be on the safe side I chuck it over both. I touch wood whenever possible, and I avoid cats at all costs (I've always been unable to determine whether a black cat is lucky or unlucky). I will not walk under a ladder, umbrellas are not opened in my flat, and I never permit new shoes to be placed on a table. My star sign is Cancer, which means that I'm loyal and home-loving, and I only have use for the most reputable astrologers. Of course, I also consult both the major and the minor *arcana* of the tarot at the turning of every season. Some people say that all this makes me irrational and superstitious but, like Blaise Pascal, I'd rather be safe than sorry.

I was interested to see that David Icke shares some of my fears, if not my habits. Mr Icke, former goalkeeper, sports presenter and Green Party person, has gone into detail in his new book, *The Truth Vibrations*. Due out in May, his book predicts that the apocalypse will start to unfold later this year culminating in a final showdown in 1997. If you lived in Somalia or Liberia you could be forgiven for thinking that it had already happened, but it hasn't. David and his acolytes, Michaela and Mari, know best. They have recently become aware of a spirit that possesses perfect balance; a spirit which resonates in the highest frequency between the polarities. Contact with this spirit (God to you and me) has enabled David, Michaela and Mari to resonate on a plane of consciousness higher than the rest of us. It has given them greater foresight. Through voices and automatic writing truths about the universe are being revealed to them on an almost daily basis. Predictably, the writing on the wall is saying *mene, mene, tekel, u-pharsin*. Its contemporary meaning couldn't be clearer: unless humanity reverses its dark thoughts all hell is going to break loose. The voices, by the way, are in full agreement.

It is at this point that I start to feel a bit wobbly. I feel like somebody who has started to play with a ouija board and wishes he hadn't. Or like a kid who has foolishly dared his mates to join him in a confrontation with the ghosts in a derelict house (it seemed like a good idea at the time!). Like fear turning to panic, each superstition seems to compound each and every subsequent superstition. The irrational becomes more irrational. Mysterious connections, untried, untested and untestable, are dreamed up, 'felt', or even 'resonated'.

A decade, a century, a thousand years, and a world sunk in wickedness, will all come to an end simultaneously at midnight on 31 December 1999. As the millennium shudders to its close, and the day of dread approaches, David Icke will be joined by many more. They will disagree about the precise timing and the precise manner of our demise, but the demise itself will not be in doubt. What I find particularly distressing about all this is that throwing pinches of salt and touching wood is not going to afford much protection. My four decades of not tempting fate are unlikely to count. In the apocalypse only the well-connected will survive, or get resurrected, or become as sheep sorted from goats.

Another problem is that the apocalypse doesn't just happen all at once. It is preceded by signs and wonders. Terrorism, crack and the greenhouse effect. Violent and ever more senseless crime starts to stalk the litter-strewn streets. HIV infection is unleashed by a God who feels forsaken. From Rochdale to South Ronaldsay social workers are gripped with erotic delirium and fevered visions. The common or garden sexual abuse of children becomes satanic, and is performed with elaborate ritual at dead of night in graveyards and abandoned quarries. I have no doubt that there is more to come. More, and ever more, terrible horrors will be revealed. The four horsemen of the apocalypse; War, Pestilence, Famine and Death are most certainly cantering about. What is even more worrying is that they do indeed seem about to break into a gallop.

The fires and epidemics from the Gulf War, and the war in Iraq, are raging unabated. Around the world millions of people are threatened with starvation, while millions more face homelessness, unemployment, pollution and poverty. There is no shortage of violence, insecurity or depravity; real, feared or imagined. There is no shortage of mysterious explanations either.

'Man's inhumanity to man', commonly known as wickedness, is an old favourite. A global greed for land and minerals is said to threaten the survival of myriad species, and to place the future of the planet in doubt. Belief in the moral causes of these ills has been rapidly transformed into a belief in the inherent instability of human society. It appears that if mankind is unaided by God or Gaia he is bound to make a mess of things. The chaos appears to be elemental; an inevitable result of human frailty. Consequently, the real culprits—militarism, trade rivalries and recession—pass almost unnoticed. In their place 'human nature' assumes the guise of 'dark thought forms' and supernatural forces. In these incarnations it is free to flit about the place yowling like a banshee.

The closing years of the twentieth century are beginning to resemble the the middle years of the fourteenth. Plagues and warfare are read as signs—comets and stars in the heavens—that foretell of catastrophe. Ideas steeped in ignorance and superstition are pressed forward as wise intuitions. Fear, pervasive and inchoate, is stirring up pandemonium, mysticism and irrationality. In such circumstances, restoring confidence in the efficacy of human ingenuity, and in the power of human cooperation, must take precedence. So, my indulgence of Russell Grant has had to go the way of my ouija board. I have made a bold start by opening and shutting my umbrella seven times in the front room! I've given my tarot cards to Oxfam and burnt my rabbit's foot to an absolute cinder. And, I might add, I have absolutely no intention of 'listening to my heart'. Nonchalantly whistling as I tiptoe about tempting fate I have convinced myself that if you all follow suit, and we all stick together, we can beat this apocalypse business once and for all.

The closing years of the twentieth century are beginning to resemble the middle years of the fourteenth. Plagues and warfare are read as signs—comets and stars in the heavens—that foretell of catastrophe

'Am I a gangster?' asks Al Pacino in *The Godfather III*, with all the weary incredulity of a bank manager. The man who never wanted to be in the mafia, let alone head of it, now wants to be legitimate again. You'd never have caught Edward G Robinson being this diffident in *Little Caesar* (1930) nor James Cagney in *Public Enemy* (1931). At the dawn of the gangster film they told it straight, like Paul Muni in the original *Scarface* (1932): 'I want the whole works. There's only one law—do it first, do it yourself and keep doing it.' Now it looks as if gangsters are facing an identity crisis.

Gangster films were popular quite simply because they showed ordinary people having a go against a system which commands fear but not respect. Everybody understands that the gangster subculture is built upon the same drive, greed and ruthless individualism which propels society at large. This version just happens to be less hypocritical, more glamorous and, vicariously at least, more accessible. It may not be a very coherent response, but the instinct is strong. In Britain it made the Great Train Robbers folk heroes overnight.

Public enemies

The gangsters liked the films too. In fact John Dillinger was gunned down in Chicago in 1934 outside the Biograph cinema, having just seen *Manhattan Melodrama*. Will Hays, of the Hays Code, Hollywood's censorship system, immediately issued an edict, 'No picture on the life or exploits of John Dillinger will be produced or exhibited...such a picture could be detrimental to the best public interest'.

When Hays wrote that, there were some 12m unemployed in America. It is hardly surprising that those early films struck a chord with a public all too familiar with the Depression, Prohibition and the exploits of Al Capone. Today's public enemy number one is likely to be a businessman, stockbroker or banker like Ivan Boesky, John Delorean or Ernest Saunders. Nothing there to worry a latter-day Will Hays, and nothing much to make a gangster film about either.

Even as early as 1936, however, in films such as *Bullets or Ballots*, the identification of the mob with respectable businessmen had been established. The trend was reinforced in the fifties wave of gangster films with much reference to 'the Syndicate' and 'Murder Incorporated'. By the time that Francis Ford Coppola made *The Godfather* in 1972 not only had the gangster film long been a highly stylised genre it was also a commonplace that organised crime, politics and respectable business were all close partners. 'Am I a gangster?' is in fact just the sort of question you would now expect. This is no ordinary guy. His business is bigger than US Steel.

'Do it first'

The two key ingredients in Coppola's heady Godfather brew are the gratifyingly decisive brutality of his protagonists (who always survive to fade away, unlike the pathetic hoodlum victims of old), and an open celebration of the institution of the mafia with its values of loyalty, responsibility, community and family. In each of the three films there comes a moment when the hero gets personally to 'do it first' (giving us the immediacy), and later a moment when all his enemies are clinically eliminated in one lethal coordinated stroke (giving us the power). Between times family affairs and business are conducted according to the stately rituals dictated by duty and tradition. The journey from Sicily via Ellis Island is not going to be wasted.

It is a constant theme that these are most reluctant criminals, no different from the priests and politicians with whom they deal, driven to illegality by vendetta, poverty, family honour and the immigrants' lack of opportunity. The American Dream is openly interrogated, found wanting and ultimately made an offer it can't refuse. The mafia's embrace is too tight for respectable society to shrug off, and too good a fit for it to really want to.

There was little that Coppola could possibly add to this, which is why *Godfather III* this year was bound to be a disappointment. It simply goes through the motions of the established formula adding nothing and serving only to inflate further the already overblown grandeur of the originals. There is no doubt however that the Godfather films prepared the way for what I believe is certainly the finest film to come out of Hollywood for many years: Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*.

Scorsese has already established himself as the master chronicler of the lowlife, aspiring dreamers of American society in films such as *Mean Streets* (1973), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *The King of Comedy* (1983) and *The Color of Money* (1986). That is a stunningly impressive list, but now he has surpassed himself.

Little big guy

Based on *Wiseguys*, the frank autobiography of real-life gang member Henry Hill, *Goodfellas* follows the career of a junior member of the mob in New York from his childhood initiation in the fifties right through to the seventies when things fall apart. The strength of the film derives from the fact that the story is told by the mobster himself, played by Ray Liotta. It is in effect a dramatic monologue, as if Scorsese had simply offered his technical services for the retired man to tell his own story in his own way.

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times', begins Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, and as soon as Ray Liotta's voice-over warms to his task with the fond words 'It was a glorious time' we know that we are in for the same epic scale. It may be the tale of the little guy, this says, but it is going to be writ large. It is a brilliant conceit, allowing us to experience from his point of view the routine consolations, the petty triumphs, the casual violence and the inevitable humiliation. We can judge for ourselves how glorious it all is, but we also get a unique sense of just how important this world is to him, and how natural it is that he should join it.

The bravura hand-held camera sequences

Photo: Warner Bros

Gangster films are big business once more. Pat Ford puts the case for Martin Scorsese to be recognised as the boss of bosses in the shooting war between the directors

Goodfellas whack

Godfathers

following his impressive (especially to his girlfriend) passage through the back of a nightclub out to the front table, and again following the regal progress of the gang boss as he acknowledges the attentions and greetings which are his due, are both already justly famous. They are however only the most dramatic of the techniques which Scorsese uses to pull us into this world. The argot is so skilfully insinuated, for example, that by the end of the film when I heard that someone had been 'whacked' I knew they were dead without a moment's reflection.

Nowhere does Scorsese intrude; he even leaves the last word to the gangster. In fact he has been much criticised for the uncritical way he presents some truly awful violence. What is most awful of course is the fact that the violence is so routine, and the psychopathic edge so close in so many of the players. This is the important thing for Scorsese to convey and he does it so well. There is for example an excruciatingly tense scene in a bar. As the goodfellas sit around killing time, Joe Pesci manipulates an exchange until the atmosphere is fraught with embarrassment and terror. Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci as the two hoods closest to Liotta not only give truly superb performances throughout the film, but they also provide screen presences which keep Liotta's own commanding performance in its place.

This is a much more compelling and convincing account of a criminal subculture than anything we have seen before. Here is what Liotta calls the 'blue-collar way to get rich quick', and anybody who doesn't take it is just a 'schmuck', what in Britain would be called a 'mug'. The fraternity is there providing a career structure, but only up to a point, and you can't really trust anybody. The community is there providing support, but can be very irksome, especially about the family. Not for Scorsese the dreamy opulence of *The Godfather*. Survival here is a much more domestic and mundane affair.

Decline and fall

It is also a more sensitive account of the changing relationship between the underworld and the society around it. In place of the rather timeless cyclical structure of the Godfather films (despite the period sets) here we have a straight decline into more modern times. The changes in fashions, in decor, in the (popular music) soundtrack are accentuated to emphasise the most important change of all, in the fortunes of our hero. He is spun further and further away from the disintegrating society of his youth. The pace of the film accelerates as cocaïne speeds up his pathetically feverish attempts to make it on his own. Paranoia descends. Nemesis beckons.

Martin Scorsese didn't win an Oscar this year, but he should have done. It was probably inevitable that the Academy would defer to the mood of a country feeling good about itself and choose a film, Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves*, which seems designed to make itself feel even better. It should be noted however that Scorsese did get the Bafta award for best director, further increasing the Pilger-enhanced credibility of that institution. In any event, before this film now gets swept away by the tide of dross from the dream machine those of you who have yet to go and see it should rectify that tragic mistake.

Totally cosmic

Toby Banks heads for the final frontier

'Operation Starlight, "The greatest single Metaphysical Task undertaken on Earth for the last 100 000 years" has now been completed.' Or so says *Cosmic Voice*, 'the magazine of interplanetary communications'. I picked it up at the Aetherius society stand at the Earth 91 Spirit Festival. When I phoned the Aetherius society in the hope of meeting a visitor from space, I was informed (rather sniffily, I thought) that there was 'no way' ordinary people could do this. The sole conduit for messages from other planets, it seems, is His Eminence Sir George King, the society's leader. Only he has contact with Mars Sector Six.

Operation Starlight was an expedition of 10 to the Swiss Alps, led by Sir George. According to the five-page account, recording every mug of tea *en route*, a few hundred yards from the summit Sir George called a halt and told the rest of the party to stay and guard the equipment. He then climbed over the top of the mountain and out of view on the other side.

'We did not have to wait long, however. Our Leader emerged once again triumphant from his metaphysical ordeal, his axe waved aloft.' The party, far from being disappointed 'remembered the words of Great Master Saint Goo-Ling: "Operation Starlight is the most important single occult task ever undertaken on this Earth for the last 100 000 years" '. But they also serve who sit and wait: 'Bidding our comrades farewell we returned to the hotel. Keith and I wondered what other mountains in Europe George King would be called upon to scale.'

Mystical but mundane

Now, you may think it's a bit unfair to pick on the Aetherius society. Some New Age types are respectable figures like Rudolph Steiner and Edward de Bono. But a quick glance at Channel 4's series *New Age*, or the magazine *Wave* would probably change your mind. Certainly the various brands on offer at the 'Psychics and Mystics' festival all shared the same peculiar combination of wild, euphoric promises and mundane, slightly old-fashioned reality. Like on Operation Starlight, the exciting action always seems to be happening somewhere else—on a higher plane, in another dimension or a different layer of consciousness, or just over the hill...

What you actually *see*—at least to the untrained eye—resembles a slightly eccentric village fete of the kind found in EF Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* books of the twenties, peopled by clairvoyants and shysters of every kind. Today's retired major types wear Frank Bough pullovers and the tarot ladies sport chic leather jackets and Walkmans to record their pronouncements. There are a few hippy punks peddling their vile joss sticks and zodiac candles, other stalls offer remedial oils, relaxation cassettes and crystals. The most *outré* element was the background music.

As a balance to some hysterical reports, I should say that I saw nothing likely to stir the residents of King's Cross to protest in the way the good people of Ashton did, with a heated picket of the 'occultist' fair. The hocus-pocus on display was very modest, with no spilling of blood or tearing of hearts from living bodies. I was one of just 12 living bodies sat in a dingy side room while Jan Shepherd lectured us on 'colour harmonics' from atop a fold-up wall-papering table, combining blinding science and chirpy salesmanship to shift her potions.

Glowing bodies

'How many of you have noticed a glow around a person's body?', Jan asked, surveying us closely in search of a response. 'Uh huh....' She gazed hopefully until the woman in front of me shifted slightly. Jan seized upon this opening: 'Yes! That'll be the ethereal template coming into effect....' As Jan struggled on gamely, I surreptitiously watched the audience. Like the rest of the people I saw that day, the clear majority were ordinary-looking and working class, in their twenties and thirties. The general attitude seemed to be mild and slightly self-conscious curiosity. Nobody seemed very excited, but they seemed to think there 'might be something in it'.

The success or failure of New Age seems to hinge on how many mildly curious people can be hooked by clever marketing. If *Wave*, the magazine of 'a new consciousness', is anything to go by, then the prospects are not good. According to editor Paul Miller: '*Wave* is for all

Photo: Simon Norfolk

those who are bewildered and bemused by reality and think that's an appropriate response. Not sorted out, decided and convinced but curious and open in strange and often wondrous times. Our brief is to report on the more fascinating aspects of this period of intense change—the meeting of consciousness and business; the search for meaning in our information society; the need to empower ourselves, discover a new global heart and become our own politics. If this sounds your cup of tea, welcome to *Wave*.'

Wave's problem is that it is trying to make a very old and boring subject appear shiny and new. It is as if the designer of *Blitz* has accidentally set out a pile of articles intended for *The Plain Truth*, the giveaway Christian magazine you find left on train seats. *Wave* has that weird religious knack of homing in on topics that are almost-but-not-quite topical and which 'affect us all' but interest practically nobody. The first issue has features on Sanskrit being the language of computers, the business world becoming feminine, and, most bizarre of all, an experiment in which a top advertising agency was commissioned to produce a campaign on behalf of the United Nations to discourage people from being greedy.

It is of course unfair to criticise a magazine which celebrates confusion for not having a point to it, and for printing rambling articles that go nowhere and say nothing. Indeed, *Wave* is something of a triumph in terms of its confusion and bewilderment. However, some of its other claims are more dubious. There is little evidence of the promised reports on 'the more fascinating aspects of this period of intense change'; in fact, the most interesting page in the magazine turned out to be an advertisement for *Blitz*, cunningly disguised as a Wavestatement. Instead, we are bombarded with a mass of facts and a bunch of crackpot theories which would make the most shameless old brain-dead hippy blush.

A long slow drip

By the time I got to the music section I was about to make a snide note about 'Desiderata', the spiritual verse that students used to buy as a 'wall text' to hang in the toilet. It was a hit record in the seventies under the title 'Child of the universe' ('no less than the trees and the birds, you have a right to be here...') It seemed like the perfect example of bogus New Age piety and facile philosophising (basic message: when a policeman splits your head open with a truncheon, remember that he is a creature of the universe and 'he too has his story to tell'.) I then turned the page to discover singer Randy Barbato announcing his new release: 'We wanted to do "Desiderata" because this cosmic thing is in the air.' Oh dear.

Wave is a singularly inappropriate title, suggesting as it does drama and excitement. The effect is more like an irritating, unremitting drip. The articles are broken by short pieces in the grand tradition of 'light' education pioneered by the *Eagle* and *Reader's Digest*, for example, interesting facts, such as the number of new words in the next English dictionary.

Who will read it? Will high-powered business executives find themselves irresistibly drawn to the feminising of the middle management orchestra? The letters page reveals that the mag must have been sent to every psychiatric ward in the country. The letters are written with the same mad enthusiasm as those endorsements from 'Mrs S, Shropshire' on the ads for pile ointment. An Australian management consultant endorses *Wave's* view of business structures, but adds, 'What you don't mention is a vital ingredient in the new work ethic. Fun. There's a hell of a way to go in changing our businessmen (and women) from the habits of macho corporatism but with fun as the name of the game, the future looks rosy'.

Christine and Kirk McNulty of Applied Futures would no doubt agree. Their article 'Brainwave' ends: 'Certainly the new paradigm will have problems of its own but at the moment at least, its dominant characteristics seem to be those of caring, individuation, personal responsibility, individual freedom, self-exploration and personal fulfilment.'

World events have rather overtaken *Wave*, which appears to have sunk after one issue, but there seem to be plenty of copies left on the shelf for any interested readers. For the moment prospects for cosmic peace look better on other planets, but before investigating this further, please remember that the Aetherius society reserves the right to cancel its public meetings 'as a result of enhanced Cosmic activity'.

Showtime in the recession

The Governor

Coming to a high street near you—a scam auction of bankrupt stock.
Andrew Calcutt saw a master wideboy perform the hottest show in town

'Come in off the road, please. Come in if you're coming.' The crowd is spilling out of the Oxford Street shop on to the pavement. A keen police officer might call this an obstruction, so we are hustled inside by a strapping youth with the kind of side-parting, short-back-and-sides haircut recommended by the Amateur Boxing Association. Hustling and bouncing is Kid Boxer's job. He's part of The Team.

There's not much room inside. It's packed with late Saturday afternoon shoppers, faces tired and tense with expectation. The shop window is empty, the wallpaper is peeling, and the carpet is pocked with cigarette burns. There are no fixtures and fittings, except for a raised platform at the far end. Behind the platform there are boxes piled on boxes of electrical goods and other fancy, tacky items.

'Give that man a watch. Here, all I'm asking is for you to say thank you. Don't tell me I'm giving away too much. Here, what would you like? A watch? Everybody wants a free watch tonight. Here, who can make use of a black and white portable TV for £1? It's yours. Here, who wants a calculator and pen set for 20p?' All eyes are on The Governor—that's what The Team call him. Just under six feet, lean, small-featured, greying hair short and well-cut, The Governor prowls up and down the platform, slapping a ruler and using the word 'here' as an expletive and a form of punctuation. The hardest-sounding comma I ever heard.

Money on my mind

'Here, who will give me £2 for what's on my mind?' If a black and white goes for £1, for £2 The Governor must be thinking of videos or CD players, right? Suddenly a roomful of people is waving money and pointing at me, me, me. 'Here, put your hands up, keep 'em up, and my assistants will come to you.' What The Governor says goes.

The Team goes round with canvas money bags, collecting £2 from about 90 people who receive lemon-coloured cards as receipts. In The Team are: Kid Boxer; another teenager with a blond wedge and a weight-trainer's thick neck; a guy in his thirties with a Rod Stewart haircut and a t-shirt that says 'Big One'; a thick-set man with a squashed-in nose; and a short, stumpy bloke who is second in the chain of command. Assisting The Governor is Sam, a teenager with long blonde hair. She could be his daughter, and she never steps down from the platform.

So you paid your £2 and you've got your receipt, am I right? You can see stacks of CDs, radio alarms and ghetto blasters, which look set to be sold off at laughable prices, right? There are 90 people who bought into this and every one of them is going to do well out of it, right?

Wrong. 'By law', says The Governor, 'I am bound to offer a lot to anyone who bids for it. So all those who paid £2 for what's on my mind will be receiving the gift which was on my mind'. Already The Team is weaving through the crowd, handing out little packages and retrieving lemon-coloured cards from the not-so-lucky 90. Shake the packages and they rustle. Inside are three of the very cheapest gold chains. So cheap your average streetwise five-year old would refuse to wear them.

'Can I have some quiet please, you're not down the Brixton Academy now.' The show must go on, and The Governor needs to steal every scene. A bit of traditional English banter serves to re-establish his dubious charisma: 'I'm not saying my mate George is a poof, he just helps them out when they ask for it....Darling, would you like a cup of tea? We can have tea and crumpets any time you like. I'll provide the tea, you provide the crumpet....Punjab, I'll tell you what I'll do for you. Is there anyone here who's English...?'

Some people are leaving, but many are hooked for a second time as The Governor displays another set of wares: 'A set of six crystal wine glasses. If you fill these up each one takes half a bottle of wine. So you'll need a lot of bottle. Here, a cassette radio which is also a searchlight, and there's even an alarm. Half-way up a mountain you can turn this on and you'll be rescued. Here, who's heard of a Rolex watch? Well this is not a Rolex, but it is a good quality copy. A portable cassette player—you can plug this into your computer, here. A set of whisky glasses and decanter. A radio alarm. If this little monster, here, doesn't wake you, you're deaf or you're dead.'

£25 a throw

'So, here, hands up who will give me what I ask for what's on my mind? Whew, it's been a hard day, I don't know whether I'm coming or going, and this microphone thing, here, feels like a wart on my neck. Here, it's the final sale tonight and I'm not even asking £90, here, not £70, not £60, here, not £50. For £25, I will treat the party to what's on my mind. If I ask you for £25, sir, can you pay me? Yes you can—you're genuine. Would you like a pair of watches, or the wine glasses, or you can have the cassette radio and the radio alarm. Here, who else will give me £25 for what's on my mind?'

As the hands go up, The Governor throws the goods down to the members of The Team standing beneath the platform. They put the items in black plastic bags, take them over to customers and collect the money. Now you notice that the door of the shop is locked. As if to prove a point, Kid Boxer and Squashed-Nose are at the back by the door, indulging in some playful sparring.

The climax is coming. 'Here, now we come to the final sale of the evening. Here, sir, could you make use of a model Cadillac with an AM/FM radio in the boot? Give it to him. Here, this is a CD system—that is one lot. Here, this is a midi-system and a tape-to-tape machine—that is the second lot. Here, this is a ghetto blaster and a karaoke machine—that is the third lot. Now, here, when CD systems came on the market they were £700. Down Tottenham Court Road, here, you will still pay between £500 and £600 for a system like this. But I'm not asking for £500, here. I'm not asking for £400, here, what's on my mind is not even £300. I want to know who will give me £250 for one of these lots?' In less than 10 minutes, half a dozen of the £250 lots have been snapped up.

The show's over

But what if you're one of the poor grey-faced punters who doesn't have a credit card or £250 cash tucked away in a back pocket? No problem. The Governor has saved the best bargains for you. And what's on his mind will go for a paltry £5. 'There are about 30 people still in the shop. Well I can only do this for the first 15. So, here, put your hands up now, don't come to me in half an hour. In half an hour we won't be here. We don't give change by the way. Here, you may be wondering what happens to the money. It goes into a pipe underneath the building, and under the road, into the bank. It goes to my bank manager's office, because I have an overdraft. What does all this mean? It means that the money does not come back. Here, there's no money back.'

Meanwhile The Team has collected £5 from 15 punters. From underneath the platform, The Governor takes a large cardboard box, and out of the box he takes 15 packages wrapped in brown paper. Members of The Team distribute the packages while The Governor commands: 'Don't open these until you leave the shop. I can only say that every man should have one of these. Now I must say the salesman's final word, which is goodnight, and I hope all the goods you've bought are stolen on the way home so you have to come back here next week.'

Now The Team is in a hurry to get everyone out: 'Come on now. We have to sweep up and get home, thank you.' Second-in-command informs me 'The Governor doesn't do interviews unless it's £100 an hour', which strikes me as pretty cheap compared to his takings for the previous 60 minutes. Outside the punters are opening up their brown paper packages and finding a cheap jewellery box containing the tackiest string of imitation pearls you ever saw. Show's over. Will no one ask for their money back? After all, this isn't a market fair on the edge of town, this is Oxford Street.

Frank Cottrell-Boyce on TV

Jihad at Sunday tea-time

On Palm Sunday 1656, the Quaker and revolutionary James Nayler rode in triumph into Bristol, on a donkey. A huge crowd cheered him on while women strewed his path with their own garments. The incident became the focus of a national panic that led to a violent hate campaign against the Quakers. Nayler was opposing a government that claimed its authority from God through the intervention of the church. He did this by making a counterclaim of divine approval for his own politics, setting himself up as a Messiah figure.

Revolutionary history is peppered with such moments—in which hereditary or institutional authority is challenged by groups or individuals claiming a new authority drawn from the direct experience of God—or gods—in their lives. I remember the spirit of Greenham, for instance, gradually acquiring a capital letter, and nowadays many ecology enthusiasts claim to be adepts of the mysteries of the Gaia. It is around this historic dialectic—the struggle between Experience and Authority—that a ratings war is currently being fought between Sir Harry Secombe's upstart hymn show *Highway* (ITV) and Thora Hird's ancient *Songs of Praise* (BBC 1).

The first thing to say is, this is a war. *Highway* and *Songs of Praise* are going for similar audiences. Usually, although they would be competing there would be some polite stand-off, like *EastEnders* (BBC 1) going out on different nights from *Coronation Street* (ITV). Thora and Sir Harry however go out at exactly the same time. You cannot watch both any more than you can follow two religions. The time of the shows itself is worth remarking. They both start at 6.40pm and go on until 7.10pm, an odd slot that suggests to me that they both used to start at 7pm and one moved earlier, say to 6.50pm, hoping to pick up both audiences by getting them first. The other would then have been forced to follow suit, and probably crept back to 6.45pm. If it keeps up they could both end up on *TV-am*.

The motive for such dirty tricks goes beyond ratings rivalry. From the point of view of *Songs of Praise, Highway* is not just a competitor, it is Evil. A bigger audience will not do. Only total annihilation will suffice. Harry must be destroyed.

Songs of Praise is the older, more establishment of the two. It is like *Down Your Way,* except all the music is holy. Each week it shows a different hymn service, punctuated by interviews with leading members of the congregation—at home or at work. Each of these chooses a hymn which we then hear being sung. The service itself is shot with three or four cameras, just like the Coronation. This means that the service can actually take place. It is not something assembled in the edit suite later from a series of takes. It is important that it is a hymn service and not a mass or anything that would touch upon any theological raw nerves, such as transubstantiation or prayers for the dead.

I don't know if the producers ever stray from the Christian fold but they could visit a synagogue or a gurdwara without changing the format or the tone. It is basically a heritage singalong. Occasionally one of the interviewees will say that a particular hymn was a source of some solace after a sad family loss. The music did the consoling though, not the Virgin Mary, or some spooky member of the Holy Trinity. This is the Church of England at prayer, if you can imagine such a thing.

Over on ITV, it's a different story. Sir Harry is to Thora as Savonarola is to Derek Nimmo. *Highway* addresses itself to instances of the operation of Christ in the lives of ordinary people. This week, for instance, we saw a woman who had been miraculously cured of a wasting disease which had kept her in a wheelchair for many years. One day she got up and walked. The next day she was jogging. She did a bit of knees-up for us in the park, and later a knees-down for Jesus in the chapel.

Miracles don't normally surprise me. But I nearly jumped out of my chair when she attributed this one to the intercession of Sir Harry and his faithful audience. Apparently, she had been on the show before—while still disabled—and asked the viewers for prayers. Her new mobility was the result. Astonishingly, Sir Harry seemed to have no problem with the role of miracle broker. Indeed later in the programme he, like James Nayler, was seen accompanying a live donkey in procession. A dead giveaway.

Like the dissenting prophets of the seventeenth century, *Highway* concocts a heady cocktail of both religious and patriotic imagery. The title itself manages to combine the idea of the journey of Faith with a sly allusion to mailcoaches and Sir Harry's Dickensian public image. The programme is littered with table-mat pictures of Merrie England: New Forest ponies, country churchyards, inbred malformed gentry, and so on. These two themes finally came together in an astonishing climax in which a Royal Navy diving expert told us how the wreck of the *Mary Rose,* which he had helped to raise, would have sunk back down on to the ocean floor had he not been quick on the prayer.

Sir Harry accepted this news with a wise smile, like a prophet who has no doubt. The programme is shot with a single camera in the style of a home video. You know the kind of thing: open on a weather vane and pull back and back until we realise, yes, it's a church. My own favourite is the one that starts with a soft-focus mess, which gradually sharpens until we recognise, with a thrill, catkins. There are lots of shots of the star walking along river banks, and so on, miming like David Cassidy in an early seventies edition of *Top of the Pops*. It is the visual equivalent of homespun, plain speaking.

Once again, the parallel with the revolutionaries of the English Civil War is telling. If John Bunyan had made videos they would have come out like this. The difference is of course that he would have addressed them to a more epic purpose than stitching up Thora Hird or the salvage of Henry V's flagship.

Time and again, *Highway* shows us people who have had overwhelming, inexplicable experiences but have refused to let it bother them. Spiritual pools winners who are not going to let it change their lives. As if Moses had said to the burning bush, 'How fascinating, and how long have you been Yahweh? Well well, must get on'. Indeed the woman who had been cured moved swiftly on from the benefits to this to the news that her book on the subject was now available from all good Christian bookshops. It was as if Lazarus had sold his story to the *Mail on Sunday*.

The message of *Highway* is that God still bursts in on people's lives but that nowadays He does so on behalf of The Week's Good Cause, rather than as an incitement to regicide. Well, Harry is a knight after all. And to think that he started out as the one that blew the loudest raspberries on the *Goon Show*.

Talking about growing up strange, check out the anniversary re-runs of the original adverts for Nestlé's Milky Bar. The lad who played the Milky Bar Kid is instantly recognisable as Roger Scruton. Also, is that Mayakovsky in the new Wranglers ad?

Thora and Sir Harry go out at exactly the same time. You cannot watch both any more than you can follow both religions

the **marxist** review of books

In the age of Chernobyl and global warming it has become fashionable to decry scientific and technological progress as being responsible for all society's ills. **Alan Harding** examines the debate on progress from the Enlightenment thinkers to postmodern pundits

The idea of progress

The idea of progress has received a bad press of late. As editors Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztompka muse in their introduction to a recent collection of essays on progress: 'We cannot but fail to be struck by a deep historical irony. Just as the nineteenth century ended with a *fin de siècle* period of brooding introspection and pessimism about the possibility of progress, so has our own.' (*Rethinking Progress,* 1990, p1) Today, however, the attitude to human progress and emancipation has become even more defensive than it was a century ago. Alexander and Sztompka note the consequences of what they call 'the crisis of confidence in progress':

'It means that sociological theories based on the premise of automatic development, in either the social, cultural, or psychological spheres, are no longer considered true. It means that the social forces and causal sequences posited by such theories—for example, that industrialisation, secularisation, and differentiation will lead to emancipation through increased education and democracy—have been thrown into doubt. It means that the agents that such theories posit as the carriers of progressive change—groups like intellectuals, scientists, and the workers—are increasingly viewed as either much less significant than in earlier years or as having failed to act in traditionally expected ways.

'The crisis of confidence in progress, in other words, has become a crisis in the explanatory power and emancipating potential of Western sociological theory.' (p3)

Today politicians and pundits, intellectuals and industrialists, Prince Charles and the man on the Clapham omnibus all view progress as though it is a thing in itself, which exists separate and apart from any human agency. Progress is associated exclusively with science and technology rather than with the idea of *social* transformation. The word 'progress' is used to suggest that people are conscious of not having control over their own lives. Forces larger than ourselves, the all-pervasive *they,* determine for good or ill the direction in which our lives move. And in the world of Chernobyl and ozone depletion it is not surprising that there is a widespread feeling that progress is either not possible because of human weakness or too dangerous because it tampers with nature.

'Good God!...the long-haired boys have lost control!', exclaimed a United States army officer witnessing the first successful atomic bomb test at Alamo, New Mexico, in July 1945 (quoted in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air,* 1985, p37). The quote sums up well the idea that science, and only science, is responsible for 'progress', whether for good or ill. As far as the US officer was concerned, the atomic bomb was a direct if perverse product of science and progress, not the result of the exigencies of US foreign policy.

While the American officer (and the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament after him) have emphasised the autonomy of military hardware from the society which produces it, Richard Blackburn in *The Vampire of Reason* (1990) warns of the revenge of nature on human society:

'Nature is not simply a backdrop for human actors, but is itself an active force which created and perpetually consumes the human species. It is the very reason why human beings perpetually recreate and destroy one another.' (Back cover)

I am not sure whether Blackburn attributes the problem to rapacious human nature, 'nasty, brutish and short', or to a presence in nature itself which is out to get us. Either way, Blackburn's thesis

Books discussed in this article include

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, **Dialectic of Enlightenment,** Verso, £10.95 pbk; Jeffrey C Alexander and Piotr Sztompka (eds), **Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces and Ideas at the End of the Twentieth Century,** Unwin Hyman, £30 hbk; Marshall Berman, **All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity,** Verso, £11.95 pbk; Jeremy Black, **Eighteenth-Century Europe 1700-1789,** Macmillan, £9.99 pbk; Richard James Blackburn, **The Vampire of Reason: An Essay in the Philosophy of History,** Verso, £32.95 hbk, £10.95 pbk; David Spadafora, **The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain,** Yale University Press, £22.50 hbk

demonstrates how far the rot has gone. The superstition which endows inanimate objects with an independent will and a fatal control over human beings smacks of animistic cults or the doctrine of original sin. It is a far cry from the spirit of scientific enquiry which was once the hallmark of the capitalist system.

The downgrading of science and its separation from other spheres of human life is also contrary to the Marxist project which regards material progress and the development of human society as inseparable. The association of technical with social advancement is at the heart of Lenin's dictum that socialism equals state power plus electrification. The degradation of this idea through Stalinism has ensured that socialism has become even more unfashionable than has science.

In the absence of a viable alternative to capitalism, people now attribute the inability of modern society to provide even the most basic necessities of life not to the failures of the capitalist system but to the very endeavour to change society for the better. For the first time since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution the dominant strand of intellectual thought denies the possibility of human betterment.

The explicit rejection of the idea that human beings can control and advance their own lives unites new right ideologues and postmodernists. The former emphasise the tainted frailty of humanity and argue for order, hierarchy and discipline. The latter point to the fragmented nature of human life and experience and extol the merits of difference. The two find common cause in their vitriolic condemnation of Marxists, who are alone in arguing for both the possibility and the necessity of material development and social transformation.

Marxists reject the one-sided view of progress which has characterised both bourgeois thought and popular prejudice. While the bourgeoisie regards progress as merely the advance of technique, for Marxists it entails both social and technical transformation. While material advancement under capitalism gives the possibility of social change, capitalist social relations act as a fetter on the development of the forces of production. Only the establishment of a new type of society can develop the forces of production to new heights and ensure that technical advance is used to promote human liberation.

Marxists have always explained that progress under the capitalist system is contradictory. The tension between the creative possibility and the destructive reality of modern society is given in the contradiction between the development of the material forces of production under capitalism and the social relations under which this takes place. Marx summed up well this contradiction when he was called upon to celebrate the anniversary of *The People's Paper* in April 1856:

'There is one great fact, characteristic of this, our nineteenth century, a fact which no party dares deny. On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay....All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. The antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand; this antagonism between the productive powers and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming and not to be contested.' (Quoted in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air,* p20)

The concept of progress, and indeed of historical development itself, is a relatively recent idea. For most of the existence of human society there was no conception of change and improvement in the human condition. For Thomas Aquinas, writing in the High Middle Ages, all that it was possible to know through human reason was the result of divine revelation. Human reason merely apprehended the divine. The whole of human experience and society could therefore be placed in a divinely given order. There was no room in this worldview for technical innovation or the reordering of society. Discussion of changes in human life emphasised decay and escape from the trials and tribulations of this vale of tears.

The concept of the fixed nature of the world and the aim of human experience defined in divine redemption are light years away from the striking summary of the modern world which Marx introduces into *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848. Marx notes that the distinctive feature of capitalism is the way that it constantly revolutionises the productive forces of society:

'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face...the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.' (*Marx and Engels Reader,* 1978, pp475-6)

Capitalism not only ensures the dizzying and continual transformation of the real world, it also compels humanity to confront its own nature for the first time without regard to divinity or external agency to solve the problems arising from such a transformation.

Here are the twin themes of the modern world. On the one hand the technical transformation of society through science, technology and industry produces not only growth and change but also inspiration, optimism and a sense of creative possibility. On the other the displacement of God and other providential forces, without the corresponding establishment of social control over technical innovation, produces at the very least an ambivalence towards change and often fear and horror at the degree of uncertainty prevailing in society.

The ambiguous attitude towards progress is a recurring theme in nineteenth-century literature and commentary. Take the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. Exhilarated by his first train journey from Liverpool to Manchester Tennyson, believing that the wheels ran in grooves, wrote the famous lines: 'Let the great world spin, forever down the ringing grooves of change.' A dozen years later, in the early 1850s, he incorporated these lines into 'Locksley Hall'. But in 1886, in 'Locksley Hall 60 years after', Tennyson's exhilaration and optimism had been overcome by pessimism and a sense of regression:

'Forward then, but still remember how the course of time
will swerve,
Crook and turn upon itself in many a backward-streaming curve.'

How did we get from the world of Aquinas to that of Marx? And how in the course of 40 years did the outlook of an English poet change so profoundly?

For most of its history, humanity saw itself as having a fixed relationship to both God and nature. If there was a sense of historical movement it was one of degeneration. Many societies had myths of a golden age in the past, from which they had fallen through sin, corruption or stupidity.

This pervasive sentiment of loss and human failing was often accompanied by millenarianism, the sense of the impending end of the world. European society was gripped by this idea in the last

The rejection of the idea that human beings can control their lives unites new right ideologues and postmodernists

years of the tenth century as the year 1000AD approached. In the irrational 1990s a similar if less pervasive prejudice looks on the cards.

Many commentators point to classical Greek society as an example of a society which had a concept of progress. Such is the veneration for Greek society that Western thinkers have constantly sought validation for their ideas by locating them in the Greek world. It is true that the citizens of Greek city states had a limited technical capacity and a science to explain the world. But so limited and static was this that it led to no systematic theory of material change and social transformation. Even materialists like the Stoics advanced a cyclical theory of the recurring rise and decline of societies which conformed to their pessimistic view of human life. The Greeks of the Golden Age of Periclean Athens regarded themselves as living in a period of decline.

The modern concepts of progress and history only emerged alongside the upheaval in society which began to take place in western and southern Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. It is impossible to put an exact date on this, but by the middle of the fifteenth century and more rapidly in the sixteenth century, the world was a changing place.

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries agricultural surpluses became more general. Trade grew and the town became more central to social and cultural life. For a European, the world became larger and more intelligible with the discovery of the telescope and the use of navigational compasses—images which, along with globes, recur time and time again in contemporary paintings.

The development of the material forces of production began to change humanity's relationship to nature and had a profound impact on intellectual thought. The new material possibilities led to the emergence of an historical imagination and the secularisation of society. For the first time, men began to investigate the world as though God did not intervene to order life on a daily basis. In the past, the idea of history had been impossible because of the universal view that human society had been ordained by divine will. With the removal of God as the first cause of human activity, historical investigation became possible.

Although religious sentiment and organisation remained powerful forces, they had less and less impact on day-to-day activity. Renaissance man still believed in a divine order, but was more confident of his unique role within it.

Over three centuries a material and intellectual struggle took place alongside the slow development of capitalist social relations. The struggle to place human knowledge on a rational foundation was not merely an academic exercise. Many suffered terribly for their beliefs as the old order fought back. The trial of the Italian mathematician Galileo by the Inquisition, ostensibly for holding the Copernican theory that the Earth revolves around the sun, is only the most famous case. Galileo survived. Many brave men and women paid with their lives for the pursuit of truth.

The development of the productive forces was slow. But by the middle of the eighteenth century both intellectually and practically there was a much greater sense of optimism about man and society. The Enlightenment ushered in a new era of thought which attempted to sweep away the prejudices and superstitions of the past and to establish on a rational foundation the study of man, society and nature.

The mood of optimism was especially pronounced in Britain where capitalist agriculture, commerce, and even industry were more advanced. The intellectual revolution in Britain is comprehensively documented in *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* by David Spadafora (1990).

Today's conservative intellectuals are keen to challenge Spadafora's optimistic view of this optimistic time. Jeremy Black attempts to put forward a revisionist view of the age in *Eighteenth-Century Europe* (1990). In a review of the book in the *Spectator,* leading conservative historian Jonathan Clarke used Black's material to emphasise the continued dominance of scarcity in eighteenth-century Europe and to underline the religious associations of many Enlightenment thinkers. Clarke's polemical purpose is to emphasise parochialism and continuity over historical movement. It is, however, a forlorn task given the self-conscious emphasis on progress that characterises Enlightenment writers. Black himself seems to recognise this. While his discussion of the eighteenth-century environment emphasises famine and plague, he is nevertheless forced to conclude with a backhanded recognition that things had changed:

'In essence, it is the diversity of eighteenth-century thought that is really impressive. People asked different questions, used various methods and arrived at different answers. The process of questioning and answering may be referred to as Enlightenment, but only if its diversity and the difficulty of too closely defining it is appreciated.' (p222)

The Enlightenment view of the world, of progress and of human society was dominated by the mechanical conception that there existed a fixed body of knowledge that simply needed to be uncovered and appropriated. Human intellectual progress was seen like the fitting together of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle or rubbing a coin over a surface to reveal the pattern beneath. Intellectuals expected to find a blueprint of the world and an essence of human society which existed outside history.

The optimistic outlook of the Enlightenment thinkers, their espousal of technical progress and their support for the liberation of man through political justice marks the high-point of the bourgeois belief in progress. The new worldview was also the product of real events—the advent of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the Great Revolution of 1789 in France. The blueprints of human perfectibility of the Marquis de Condorcet and William Godwin and of the great Utopian socialists such as Claude Henri Saint-Simon and Robert Owen were the euphoric responses to the disrupting and liberating potential of the rapid material and social change of this period. For a brief moment the bourgeoisie proclaimed its ability to advance the interests of the whole of humanity. It marked the birth of modernity.

In the early days of capitalism, the reality of material advance and the teeming creativity of human ingenuity were in the ascendant: hence Tennyson's response to the arrival of the railway. The willingness to experiment was associated with immediate material benefit and was accompanied by a new sense that the developments would sweep away everything in their path. But the technical innovations of the Industrial Revolution not only allowed for the possibility of material progress. They also brought misery to millions, destroying the livelihoods of artisans and creating a new working class in the most degrading of circumstances. This is how an apologist for the new order greeted the mule of Samuel Crompton with its self-acting mechanism:

'A machine apparently instinct with the thought, feeling, and tact of the experienced workman—ready in its mature state to fulfil the functions of a finished spinner. Thus, the Iron Man, as the operatives fitly call it, sprung out of the hands of our modern Prometheus at the bidding of Minerva—a creation destined to restore order among the industrious classes, and to confirm to Great Britain the empire of art. The news of this Herculean prodigy spread dismay through the union, and even long before it left its cradle, so to speak, it strangled the Hydra of misrule.' (From Andrew Ure, *Philosophy of Manufactures,* 1835)

The misery caused by industrialisation produced from the outset of the capitalist epoch a distaste for the consequences of productive development. William Blake, himself a London artisan and a radical enemy of the established order, captured this sentiment when he invoked 'the dark satanic mills' in a call to arms to rid the world of these forces for corruption and degradation.

While the capitalists were hard-nosed about the impact of industrialisation, elements in the intelligentsia reacted nervously to change. Even as early as the middle of the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed the bewilderment and the sense of loss which have become the predominant responses of bourgeois intellectuals to the constant revolutionising of capitalist society:

'I'm beginning to feel the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into. With such a multitude of objects

passing before my eyes. I'm getting dizzy. Of all the things that strike me, there is none that holds my heart, yet all of them together disturb my feelings, so that I forget what I am and who I belong to.' (From *Emile, ou de l'Education,* quoted in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air,* p18)

Rousseau blamed the confusion on the supremacy of reason. He proposed the reassertion of sentiment and intuition. He extolled nature over civilisation and the noble savage over the corrupt product of human society. In his view, progress was a movement away from the nature of humanity. Rousseau's greatness lay in his trenchant critique of the social misery created by capitalism and in his defence of democracy and equality. His weakness lay in taking refuge in the past and in seeing the remedy to social problems as lying in the reordering of the personality.

The development of the productive forces under capitalism posed new problems for humanity. But it also dragged into being a new force in society—the working class—which could achieve emancipation only through the overthrow of capitalism. The historic role of the working class was to realise the possibility of material progress by getting rid of a society which made profit, not need, the criterion for human endeavour.

The high-point of the bourgeois revolution and the bourgeois belief in progress is the period from the French Revolution of 1789 to the defeated revolutions of 1848. In that same year in *The Communist Manifesto* Karl Marx and Frederick Engels sounded the death knell for the bourgeoisie and drew attention to the working class as the universal class whose historic role was the emancipation of all humanity.

The defeated revolutions of 1848 showed that the bourgeoisie was no longer a revolutionary class and demonstrated its retreat from its own political programme of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Far from striking a blow against feudal and aristocratic reaction the bourgeoisie now aligned itself with these backward sections against the class it now most feared—the working class.

Despite the alignment of the bourgeoisie with reactionary sections of society, the capitalist class did not lose its belief in its own system nor in the benefits of material progress. Indeed, taking Britain as an example, the years between the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the onset of the Great Depression in the 1880s were the zenith of capitalist power and confidence. Lord Macauley writing in the 1860s made this point in his *History of England:*

'[The history of England] is emphatically the history of progress....In the course of seven centuries, the wretched and degraded race have become the greatest and most highly civilised people that ever the world saw...have been the acknowledged leaders of the human race in the career of political improvement.' (Quoted in *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain,* p405)

In this period, the perception of progress as the successful product of liberal capitalism still dominated over the uncertainty at what the future might bring. The turning point came with the onset first of economic crisis at the turn of the century and the cataclysmic impact of the First World War. Increasingly the capitalist class began to doubt its historic role and to fear progress and change. Such pessimism was initially primarily a European phenomenon. The American ruling class retained its sense of historic possibility for much longer, along with its economic dynamism. In recent years, however, it too has been preoccupied with economic decline and social fragmentation, leading to a much more sombre mood about the possibilities for the future.

Despite the renunciation by the bourgeoisie of its own heritage, the hopes and aspirations of the Enlightenment thinkers for progress and emancipation remain valid. However, progress is not, as the Enlightenment rationalists believed, a series of general laws about nature, man or society waiting to be apprehended. Nor can human progress and perfectibility be willed into existence by a small section of society as the Utopian socialists believed. Least of all can progress be associated merely with the accumulation of technique and goods. Real progress can only be achieved through *social* transformation. Progress today can only be achieved through the overthrow of the society that acts as the fetter of human emancipation and betterment. The uneven development of the world economy in the imperialist epoch has emphasised the disjuncture between the material possibilities of modern society and the social relations of capitalism which are a barrier to human emancipation. Science today can explore the outermost reaches of space and examine the innermost aspects of life. But capitalism ensures that despite such scientific advance, the world is in thrall to famine and war. The Gulf War in which America used the technology of the twenty-first century to bomb Iraq back to the stone age summed up the two sides of capitalist society.

Progress today can only be achieved through the overthrow of the society that acts as the fetter on human emancipation

In response to the failure of capitalism to emancipate humanity, bourgeois intellectuals have questioned not the social order but the idea of progress itself. In the recent period, liberal and left-wing intellectuals have joined capitalist apologists in blaming the belief in progress and reason for the catastrophes of modern society. The experience first of the Nazi Holocaust and then of the Stalinist gulags led many to review their whole attitude to progress and social transformation.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two leading members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, led the way in blaming progress for barbarism. *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* first published in 1944, remains the seminal work in this tradition. It is a difficult book to read but should be tackled because it has informed all subsequent challenges to reason, progress and especially revolutionary change. 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.' Adorno's dictum epitomises the pessimism of the European intelligentsia.

The ambiguity that was always implicit in capitalist development has been transformed into an historic fatalism that asserts that knowledge itself is impossible for humanity. The irrationality which arises out of the capitalist order is placed at the service of this order. The denial of both the possibility and necessity of social transformation is nothing more than a crude apology for the continued existence of this system.

The barbarism of the last years of this century is not the product of an unbridled autonomous technical force unleashed by the irredeemable nature of man. It is the result of a social system that acts as an obstacle to progress. Only through the establishment of a new society can we liberate the human potential for progress.

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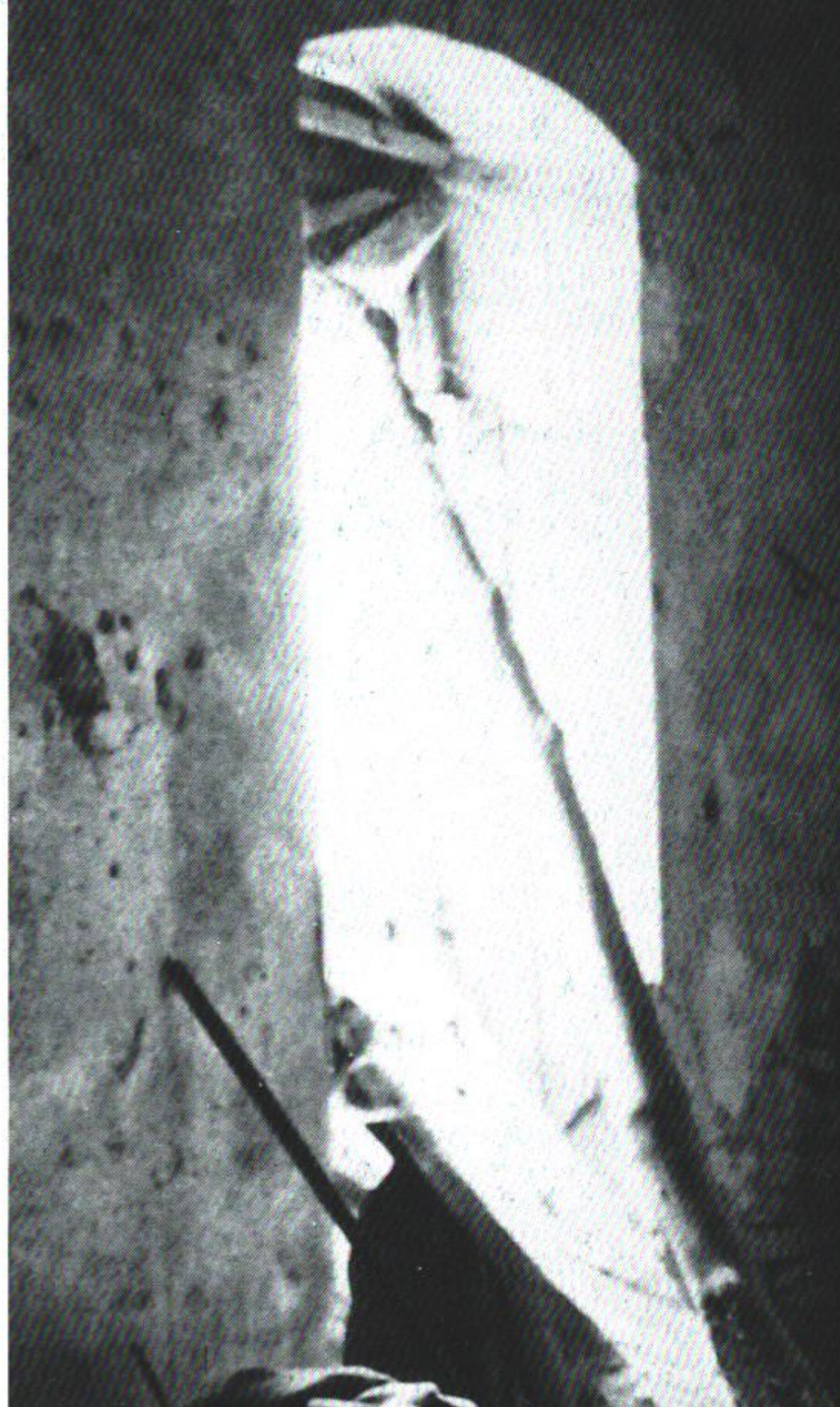

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