

LIVING MARXISM

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Hands off the Gulf!



The British and the Germans

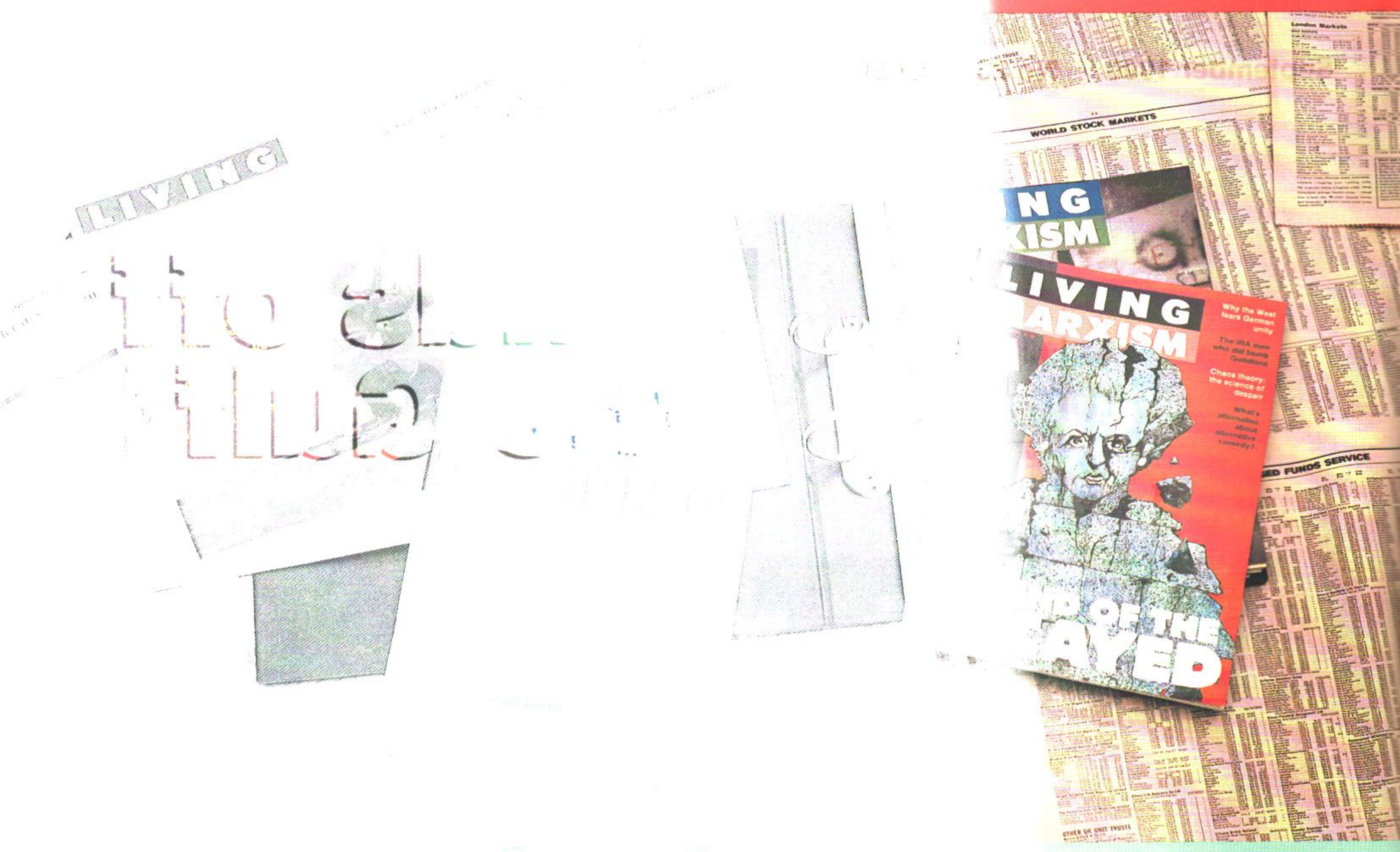
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back in fashion



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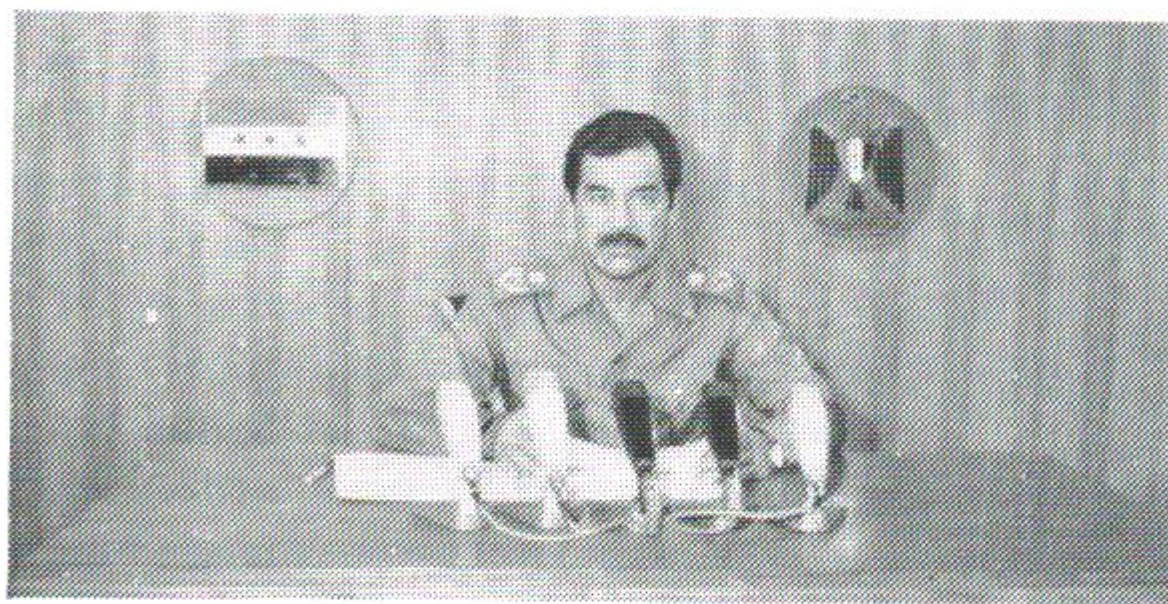
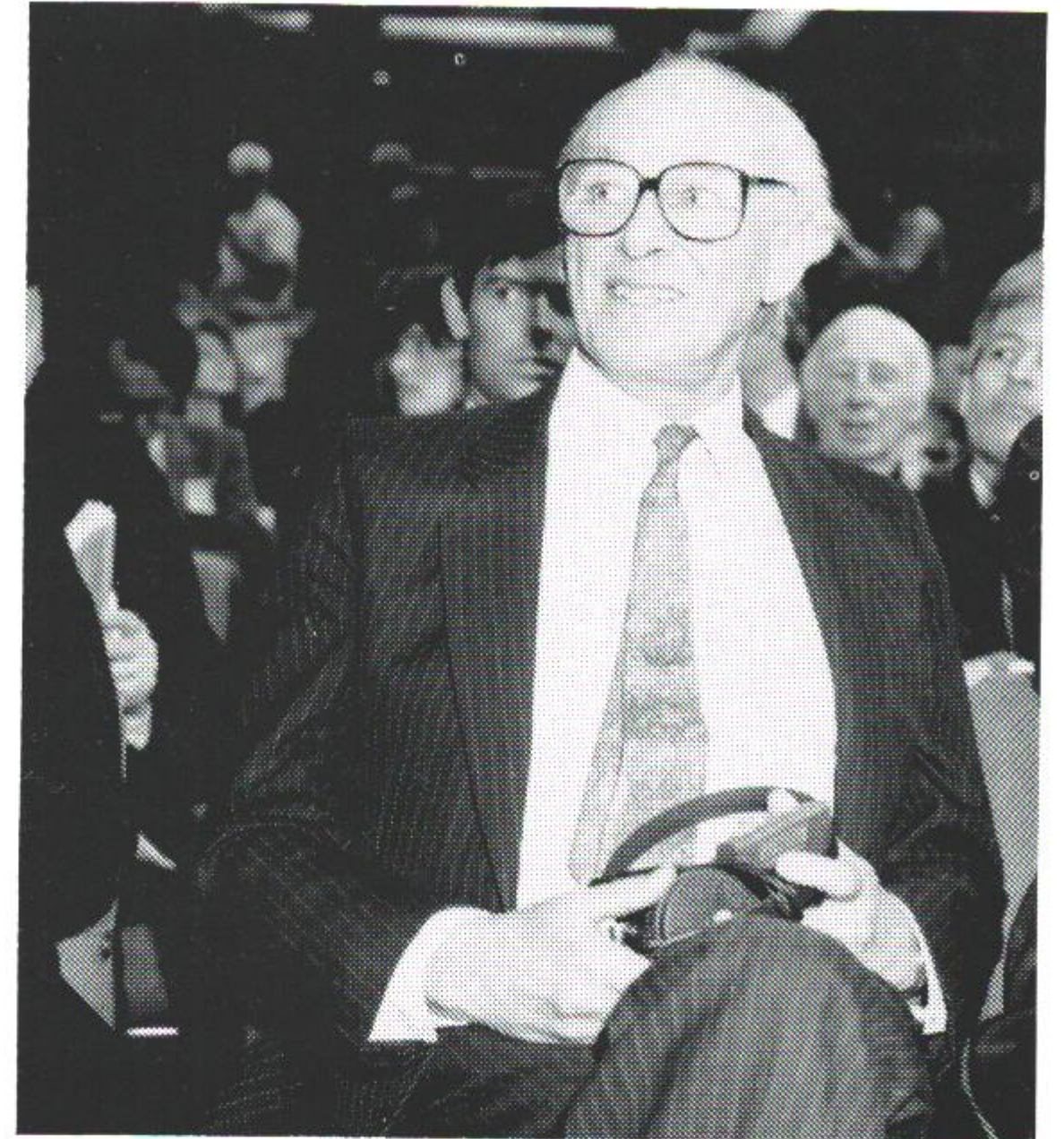
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COVER PHOTO: The USS Saratoga in the Gulf, Jane's Information Group

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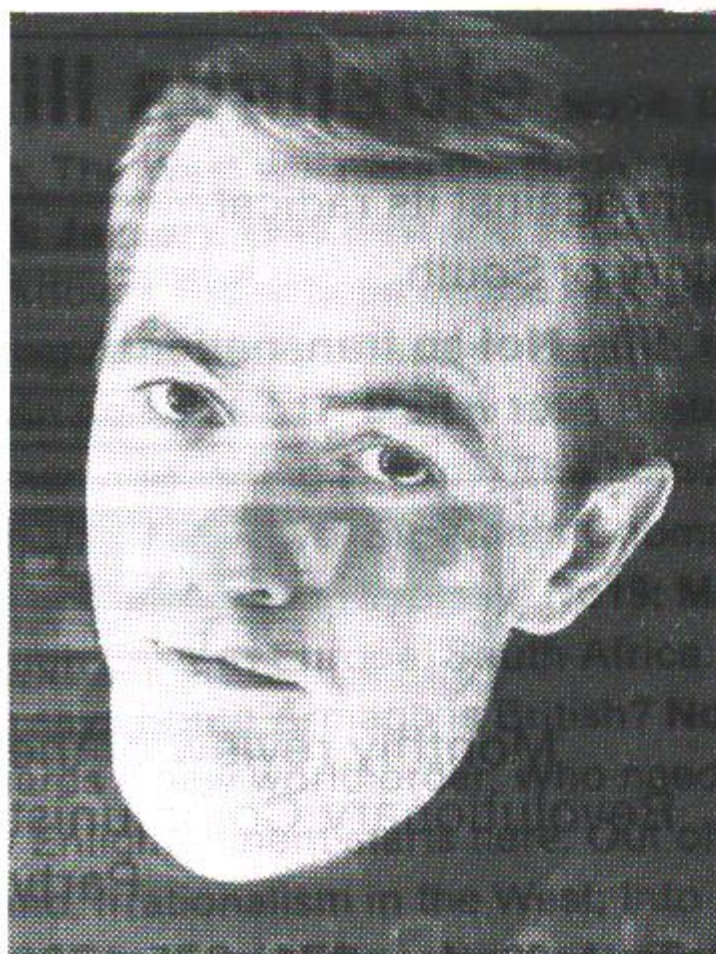
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**LIVING
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Party
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editorial

Hands off the Gulf!



editor
mick hume

At the time of writing, the war fleets and air forces are steaming into the Gulf, and the big guns of America and Britain are just getting Saddam Hussein's Iraq in their sights. The outcome of the crisis remains uncertain. But one thing should have been clear from the start. Behind all of the pious speeches about peace and the sermons on freedom being delivered in London and Washington, the peoples of the Middle East are once more being used as pawns in the West's Great Power games.

In the Reagan years the USA went gunning for the Libyans (it bombed the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986 with British

help), and the Iranians (it blew an IranAir civilian airbus out of the sky in 1988). Now, in the Bush era, the USA is going after the Iraqis. The countries on the chopping-block change, but America's aim remains much the same: to cut a troublesome Arab or Islamic regime down to size, and so make the oil-rich and strategically vital Middle East safe for imperialism again.

Of course, the American and British authorities have their own explanation for sending their hi-tech death squads into the Gulf. 'There is no justification whatsoever for [Iraq's] outrageous and brutal act of aggression', president George Bush told the American people on 8 August. 'A puppet regime, imposed from the outside, is unacceptable.... Kuwait's legitimate government must be restored to replace the puppet regime.'

Bush has got some gall to pose as the gallant defender of small states. Does he suppose that we have already forgotten his own truly 'outrageous and brutal act of aggression' in December, when US forces turned Panama City into a rubble-strewn graveyard? After that invasion was over, at a cost of around 7000 lives, Washington appointed Guillermo Endara as president of Panama while its troops remained in control of the country—a clear-cut case of 'a puppet regime, imposed from the outside' if ever there was one.

If we want to talk about US-imposed puppet regimes, however, there is no need to move out of the Middle East. It is full of them. When Bush speaks of restoring a 'legitimate government' in Kuwait, he does not mean one with the support of its people, but one which bears the White House seal of approval.

To lend international legitimacy to the US-led intervention in the Gulf, the conflict between Iraq and Kuwait has been presented as a clash between black and white, evil and innocence, fascism and freedom. In fact there is nothing to choose between the two, except that Saddam is stronger than the deposed Emir. The West built both states, and has armed and supported both governments, often against their own people.

● The media have been trying to convince us that Kuwait is an historic independent nation. It is not. Like its neighbours, Kuwait is an artificial entity made by the British and French colonialists who carved up the Middle East in the years following the First World War. The Western powers created states and drew borders across the Middle East to suit their own purposes, as they plundered oil reserves and established outposts of empire.

The line separating the 'nation' of Kuwait from Iraq, for example, was pencilled in by a British general at a time when both areas were under occupation. Kuwait's sovereign

Living Marxism supports:

The defence of Iraq against any act of Western aggression

The immediate withdrawal of British, American and all Western forces from the Gulf

The victory of the Middle Eastern masses over imperialism and its stooge regimes in the region

Living Marxism predicts:

That the Arabs, and especially the Iraqis, are going to be scapegoated for causing the coming economic recession in Britain and America—a recession which was on the cards long before the Gulf crisis began

territory was probably mapped out over dinner in an imperial officers' mess; there seems little reason why we should consider that to be any more of a 'legitimate' nation than, say, the Iraqi-Kuwaiti union which Saddam enforced in August.

The West constructed this system of Meccano-kit countries to keep the Middle East under its control. The Arab and Islamic masses have been left divided among themselves and enslaved by a selection of Western-approved despots. Since the Americans took over the job of maintaining this state of affairs after the Second World War, they have carried on all the fine old British traditions in the Middle East: arming tyrants, staging invasions and setting up coups to install more pliable regimes when required. The USA has also bankrolled the state of Israel as a ruthless local gendarme to deal with the Palestinians and other anti-imperialists in the region.

Kuwait and Iraq are prime examples of the products of imperialism in the Middle East.

Kuwait is a nasty little rentier state. Since it gained independence from Britain in 1961, a family clique has ruled a rigidly structured society. A minority of Kuwaitis has grown fabulously rich on oil wealth while the majority of the population, migrant workers from Palestine and across the Middle East, toils in servitude. The Kuwaiti regime was no more democratic or popular than Saddam Hussein's; only 60 000 male members of the ruling class could ever vote in Kuwaiti elections, and even that parliamentary charade was abolished five years ago. The Emir and his family were widely despised and sometimes shot at, kept in power by their security forces—which were armed and trained by Britain and America.

Today America has cast Iraq in the role of villain. Yet it too was made in the West, and has often acted as a Western agent. The same Royal Air Force now lining up against Baghdad was once called 'the midwife of modern Iraq', because of its role in creating the new state in 1920, when it carried out

blanket bombing raids against those in Iraq who opposed the rule of Britain's stooge, Feisal.

Nor have today's Western powers always been so upset about Iraq invading its neighbours. Ten years ago this month, they gave Saddam the nod to attack the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, hoping that Iraq could hold back the Islamic revolt which had overthrown the Shah, America's most important policeman in the Gulf. The Gulf War was to last eight bloody years. For much of that time, as Jill Gordon shows elsewhere in this month's *Living Marxism*, the Western powers shored up Iraq against the more powerful Iran; they sought to maintain a modicum of stability in the region by keeping the war in a state of stalemate, while the bodies piled up on both sides.

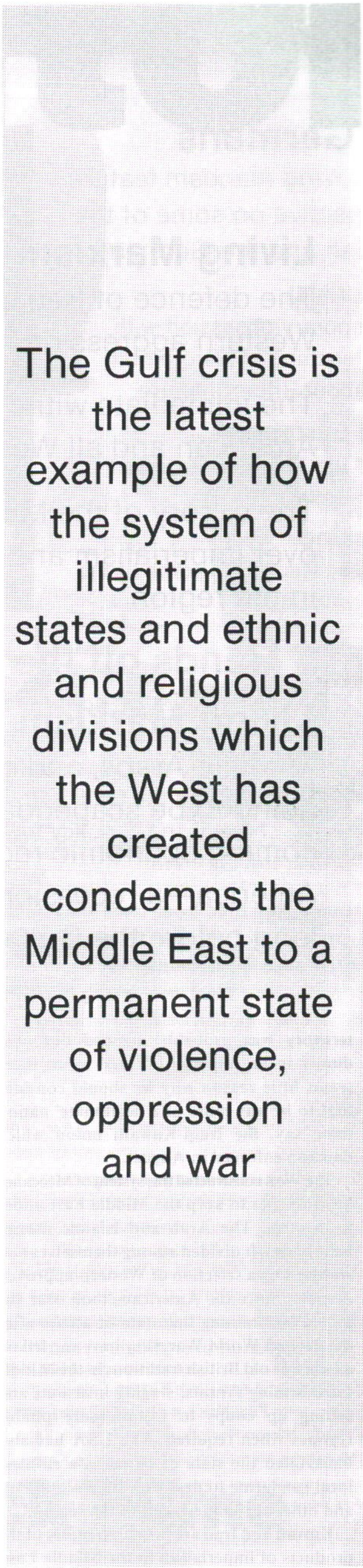
Looking back now, the Gulf War years are full of bitter ironies which make the West's current ranting against Saddam look ridiculous. The Americans were so keen to protect Saddam that, when the US navy began escorting Kuwaiti tankers through the Gulf in 1987, it claimed to be protecting them from Iran—even though *Iraq* was responsible for most attacks on shipping, including a missile strike against the USS *Stark*. Meanwhile, the Emir of Kuwait was pumping billions into Iraq's war-chest, in the hope of preventing the Islamic fervour of the Iranian masses from reaching the dispossessed within his own realm.

All the crimes of which the West now accuses Saddam, including the use of chemical weapons against Kurds and Iranians, were known about during the Gulf War. But because it suited its ends, the West kept quiet and kept trading arms for Saddam's oil. Only after those arms had helped bring Iran to the negotiating table in 1988 did the West turn against Iraq's attempts to expand its influence further; and even then, export-starved Britain was still willing to set up a secret deal to sell Saddam the infamous 'big gun'.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and capture of its oilfields was in some ways the last chapter of the Gulf War, a desperate throw by Saddam to resolve the economic crisis and domestic unrest which the conflict with Iran had left behind. The USA and other Western powers created this situation; they encouraged him into that war, armed and funded him to fight it and have since demanded that he do something about his massive war debts. Yet now they turn against their erstwhile ally—not because they are opposed to invasions in general, but because they see this one as a threat to their domination of the region.

The Gulf crisis is the latest example of how the system of illegitimate states and ethnic and religious divisions which the West has created condemns the Middle East to a permanent state of violence, oppression and war. That collapsing system is now dragging the masses further down into the depths of barbarism.

The sectarian divisions which France wrote



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into Lebanon's constitution have been tearing the country into raw pieces for 15 years. The Israeli state, which the Americans made what it is today, has now spent almost three years trying to baton the Palestinian *intifada* into the sand of the occupied territories. The eight-year Gulf War between Iran and Iraq, fought with Western guns and credit, left a million dead. Now a conflict among the imperialists, their local agents and their former agents threatens to plunge the peoples of the Middle East into the bloodbath again. As the Middle Eastern order disintegrates, more conflict is inevitable. And the American-led response demonstrates that more militarism is the West's only answer to the problems which it has created.

The frenzied attempt to brand Saddam as 'the new Hitler' is a smokescreen, like the anti-Khomeini and anti-Gadaffi propaganda campaigns before it. The truth is that Western intervention is the cause of the suffering and oppression in that tortured corner of the world. Even in their worst moments, neither Saddam nor any other ruler of a backward state can hold a candle to the imperialist powers when it comes to inflicting death and destruction. Anything which allows those powers to get a firmer grip on the Gulf can only be to the detriment of the masses there.

● *Living Marxism* demands 'Hands off the Gulf!' in the belief that we ought resolutely to resist all attempts to bring a state like Iraq more firmly under the Western thumb, whether it be by sanctions or by air-strikes.

The Western powers will never admit responsibility for causing a war. Conflict between imperialism and a third world state is always blamed on the latter, whose leader is generally depicted as mad, bad and a sexual deviant; other character defects such as cannibalism (Idi Amin of Uganda), or witchcraft and child abuse (General Manuel Noriega of Panama) are optional extras, depending upon which British newspaper you read. It was in this spirit that the *Sun* produced 'an expert' in August who ventured the expert opinion that Saddam 'may be into kinky sex and snuff movies'—because the Iraqi leader wears uniforms a lot.

The central accusation against Saddam, however, has been that he is 'the new Hitler'. This is the sort of irrational, emotive label guaranteed to get a good response regardless of the facts. There is no time here to enter the gutter press discussion about 'how the two Hitlers compare'. Suffice it to say that, if killing a lot of people in a war of conquest makes you a Nazi, then former US president Richard Nixon (who was recently honoured by Bush) is far better qualified to be Hitler than is Saddam, since Nixon carpet-bombed millions of Vietnamese and Cambodians into their graves just 20 years ago. Or if using

vicious repression on your own people is the main qualification required, then Hitler has been alive and well and governing Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador and countless other US satellites for years.

The significance of the 'Hitler' campaign against Saddam is that it marks a break with familiar themes of the Cold War years. In the recent past, the first accusation which the Western powers would have hurled against Saddam was that he was a Soviet agent engaged in an international communist plot. They have not done so, even though Saddam has had close links with the Soviet Union. Instead, with the Soviets supporting the USA and cutting off arms supplies to Iraq, the Gulf crisis has become the first major international incident of the post-Cold War era.

The events in the Gulf have become a focus for the attempt to structure the new world order. This is why the USA has chosen to inflate the local affair of Iraq invading Kuwait into a huge global issue. The Gulf crisis has become caught up in Great Power politics, as America seeks to use it to reassert its leadership of the 'Free World'.

The shift in the balance of economic power, away from America and towards more dynamic nations such as West Germany and Japan, has created tensions within the Western Alliance over the past decade. Through the eighties, however, the USA was usually able to keep its allies in line by playing the Cold War card, using the alleged threat from the Soviet 'evil empire' to hold the West together behind its leadership of the Nato alliance. The events of the last 12 months have wrecked that strategy.

● The collapse of Stalinism in the East has effectively ended the Cold War and discredited any talk of a Soviet threat. Now it is plain to all that the Warsaw Pact is the Mickey Mouse of military alliances. As a consequence, and with the re-emergence of a united Germany, the USA has found it harder to call the shots in the West.

Against this background, Washington has looked upon the recent turn of events in the Gulf as both a problem and an opportunity: a problem in as much as Saddam's aggressive assertion of his independence posed a challenge to US authority; and an opportunity because, by presenting that challenge as a Hitlerite threat to the civilised world, the USA could put pressure on the rest of the Western world to follow its lead once more and take united action against Iraq.

The exercise may well confirm America's position as the world's policeman. But the uneven response of the other Western powers to Washington's calls for support, and their reluctance to become too deeply involved, has shown that their unity is now paper thin. Only the British government was truly

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enthusiastic about going to the Gulf, as Thatcher seized upon an increasingly rare opportunity to strut about on the world stage and make it look as if Britain still counts for something.

In its global dimensions, the Gulf crisis seems to point ahead to the shape of international relations in the nineties. More and more, as the old myths of the East/West conflict disappear, the world stage will be dominated by tensions among the Western powers themselves, with militarism looming ever-larger at the centre of affairs. It is in this sense, rather than in Saddam's personality, that comparisons with the pre-war years of the 1930s make some sense. As in the thirties, the third world looks likely to be the setting in which the imperialist nations start to play out their power struggles. We can expect the battlefields of the Middle East to get bloodier yet as a result.

● But America, Britain and the rest will not have things all their own way. They have embarked upon a high-risk strategy in the Gulf. Saddam Hussein proved he was far from crazy when he called on the Islamic world to launch a holy war against the West, thus demonstrating his keen awareness of the depth of anti-Western feeling among the oppressed millions of the Middle East. It was this same depth of feeling which initially made other Arab leaders less than keen to come down on the side of America. They know that, if an anti-Western backlash really took off, it could sweep away every unpopular puppet regime in the Middle East.

The masses of the Arab and Islamic world represent a powerful barrier to the success of Western militarism. They are the force for progress in the region. Peace can only come when they are able to unite across their phoney borders, in a struggle against imperialism and all of the reactionary local regimes which it has imposed and sponsored. Those in the West who aspire to liberation have every reason to support that struggle against the warmongers of Washington and Westminster.

There is one other point that we in the West should take to heart about the Gulf crisis. Already we have seen the Iraqis being blamed for pushing up oil prices, causing higher inflation and bringing on an economic recession. For the third time in less than 20 years, the capitalists of the Western world are preparing to scapegoat the Arabs for the failure of their system. Yet the signs of recession have been looming larger and larger in Britain and the USA for months before the Gulf crisis. The responsibility for our economic problems lies with the rulers of the Western world—the same powers who have once more pushed the Middle East to the edge of disaster, and perhaps beyond.

The 'queer-bashing' debate

Ted from Ealing (letters, August) shows why socialism is not seen as having much to offer lesbians and gays. Ted would like to see the Ealing cottage murders as an 'isolated mental health case'. This effectively depoliticises the issue of gay (and lesbian) bashing, which has increased considerably since the introduction of the government-sponsored Aids panic. Neither is it the simple matter he assumes for gay men to meet sexual partners. He ignores the very obvious fact that many gay men have conformed to society's expectations, married and had children, and that any kind of openly gay identity is impossible. (It's pretty risky anywhere—if Ted had walked down a road holding hands with another man he may have discovered this.)

If Ted is one of the 'some socialists' who 'object to cottaging', this indicates more about the low level of 'some socialists' political education than it does about the way to fight against gay oppression. Cottaging and prostitution are not the same phenomena and Ted's supposed concern with sexual and economic exploitation by middle class men of working class youth can only feed the prevalent idea that homosexuality is predatory and sick.

Revolutionary socialism has a mixed history when it comes to fighting for sexual freedom. The majority of people remain unaware of the challenges that have been posed to conventional morality by communists. We need to go on a very offensive offensive and point out the hypocrisy that surrounds any conventional debates on the subject, not just ape them, as Ted does. And finally, can he be serious? Since when has 'lifestylism' been about getting your head kicked in, losing your job, being subjected to the discriminatory law of the Sexual Offences Act, being imprisoned, etc?
Heather Rutledge Birmingham

So now fighting for equal democratic rights is an entertainment for the Bohemian fringe? I wish Ted from Ealing could be made to tell that to the faces of the hundreds of lesbians and gay men who are attacked, assaulted, arrested, made homeless and murdered each year.

Describing the murder of Michael Boothe as merely the work of an isolated psychopath and not indicative of a more general social problem is nonsense. The particular individual(s) involved in any queer-bashing may indeed have some personality disorders. What transforms them into a more general social problem is the legitimisation of anti-homosexual behaviour by a full battalion of laws and statutes that deny rights to homosexuals and encourage and sanction popular prejudice and hatred.

Ted's understanding of the effects of this oppression on homosexuals is clearly limited. He asks how heterosexuals meet sexual partners. Well, Ted, anywhere and everywhere—at school, in the office, in the canteen, on the train, in the park, in the waiting room and on the street. No-one bats an eyelid, feels



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shocked, arrests them or is driven to such a fury they begin to throw punches at Ann and Pete Hetty when they see them kissing on the Number 42 bus. Homosexual relations on the other hand are at best dismissed and at worst subject to violent reactions. The opportunities open to homosexuals to meet same-sex partners are usually nil.

As a gay man I would love to be able to meet with other men for sex in exactly the same way as my heterosexual peers. However, I realise this will never happen unless we can popularise the fight for lesbian and gay rights. That means defending homosexuals wherever and whenever they are attacked.

Andrew Greenlees Liverpool

Animals are not witless

Although Ms Cohen might not like dogshit, that is no excuse for ignorant and speciesist remarks (July Personal Column). She says that animals have no interest in free speech, the right to vote, etc, but do babies or the mentally ill? Yet the latter are seen as deserving moral considerations. We do not believe that just because animals have no interest in trade unions that they should be hunted, butchered or tortured, because like humans they can feel pain and suffer.

Although those 'dumb and witless creatures' might not be able to read such literary pieces as *Living Marxism*, they can make rational decisions regarding their own interests. By prioritising human over animal oppression, Ms Cohen has become one of the oppressors we are fighting. Her ignorance is shown by her belief that animal experiments are necessary—obviously she's read too much Research Defence Society propaganda. When it comes to crap, I sadly believe that she is more guilty than the dog at Number 8.

Steve Harrow Brixton

I agree with most of the views of Louise Cohen (July Personal Column) but I must question some of the points she made. Does she not realise that due to some of the actions of the superior human race, some species are now extinct? And as for the dogshit, perhaps the methods Louise mentions for combating the

'problem', (ie, blame the dog) could be used against the creatures who carefully steer their pets towards that bus-stop or stand calmly while their mongrel craps in the middle of the pavement. Please do not try to convince me that these beings have any more brains than the mutts they own.

She claims that 'only humans can understand what a civil liberty is'. Yes, only humans have fought for rights, and have won small gains against the oppression of other humans. Animals would probably live quite happily in their dumb and witless world without any rights. How many examples of animal oppression are there? Sheep may not have campaigned for the right to vote, but how many of them would have put Margaret Thatcher in office for the third time?

Linda Hollings (with two cats toilet-trained at three months) London

Ms Cohen (July Personal Column) is only right about one thing. Hamsters don't ride motorbikes! Then again hamsters don't make nuclear bombs either. Nor do rabbits pump petrol fumes into the atmosphere, cats don't dump nuclear waste into the sea and monkeys don't spray poisonous chemicals over the land upon which food is grown.

I wonder if Ms Cohen has ever looked after an animal. She refers to them as dumb and witless. I must say that I wouldn't like to be kept by her if I were unfortunate enough to be born with four legs instead of two.

Robin Lane Campaign Against Leather and Fur

Was Einstein a mystic?

John Gibson and Manjit Singh's review of recent publications on modern science: 'Knowledge is power' (July) presents an inaccurate account of opinions surrounding the interpretation of quantum theory. Heisenberg and Bohr did not argue that quantum mechanics proved there was no reality independent of observation. The Copenhagen interpretation, as it is usually called, merely takes the position that it is impossible to separate the measuring apparatus from the system on which measure-

ems

ments are made. This interpretation explicitly avoided any metaphysical speculation about the unobservable.

Einstein thought that quantum mechanics could not be taken to provide a complete description of physical reality. In support, several theories were developed which postulated 'hidden variables'. It was not until 34 years later that JS Bell proved conclusively that no hidden-variable theory of the type indicated by Einstein could reproduce the results of quantum mechanics. Since Bell's development, experiments have been performed which refute the hidden-variable theories but are entirely consistent with quantum mechanics.

John Gibson and Manjit Singh champion Einstein as the upholder of objectivity in the face of the idealistic mysticism of the likes of Heisenberg. In order to do so it was necessary for them to provide a popular mystical reinterpretation of Heisenberg's 'interpretation'. They appear to have overlooked the fact that it was a result of the partial adoption of Machian idealism that led Einstein to develop the theory of Special Relativity, and to reject the notion of objective, absolute motion. They also conveniently overlook the fact that it was Einstein's own deeply religious commitment to the notion that 'God does not play dice!' that led him to reject some of the conclusions of quantum physics. I would like to challenge the superficial analysis of the interpretations of quantum theory by raising the question: who is the more mystical, Einstein or Heisenberg?

Daniel Wolstenholme *Imperial College*

Progress v nature

John Gibson and Manjit Singh's article 'Let's conquer tomorrow's world' (July) has put me in a lot of doubt about Marxism if its exponents have opinions such as these. They argue for scientific growth and progress designed for human need rather than capitalist profit, claiming that the 'purpose of science is not to create new laws of nature but to manipulate existing ones for our benefit'. But why must the human animal be so selfish? Why do we need to manipulate the earth into working for us, rather than gently coaxing it to work with us?

Our experience has proved that manipulating nature for so-called progress, hence encouraging greater life expectancy and

larger populations as well as environmental destruction, only kills the hand that feeds us. Why can't we work *with* nature, by developing industries and social policies geared towards control in accordance with our limited resources? Isn't it short-sighted to hail 'future breakthroughs comparable to the petroleum industry, aircraft, automobiles, electric power and computers', when it is these developments, along with capitalist misuse, that have been the main offenders in destroying the planet we live in?

Byron J Gaist *Durham*

Charitable impulses

Don Milligan's article 'Save us from Mother Teresa' (June) left me with the nagging question of what he might say to someone he found dying in the streets of Calcutta or London: 'I can't help you because to do so would make us both collude in the corrupt system in which we find ourselves—wait for the revolution, comrade!'

Whatever the defects of the system, my personal response to poverty, sickness and injustice must be to help in whatever practical ways possible. This does not mean that political fights should not also be fought. The fact that Mother Teresa does not seek to challenge the system does not of itself corrupt her charitable works or change the remarkable quality of her example to the whole of humanity.

As Marcuse said: 'When I feed the poor they call me a saint: when I ask why the poor are hungry they call me a communist.' The best way forward is perhaps therefore for us all to be saints and communists.

Paul Collier *London*

Abortion and handicap

It is not hard to spot the reactionary consequences of the argument cited by Tim Clements (letters, June) that if genetic research had been better in the past then many disabled people alive now would not have been born. Perfectly true, but similarly, if contraception had been more available and acceptable perhaps he would not have been born, and if someone had taught the rhythm method to Karl Marx's mum we might be in a real mess. There would seem to be no end to

the horrific possibilities if the fight for women's rights had been more successful.

It is not surprising that disabled people find pro-abortion arguments offensive. Recent debates and government legislation have treated fetuses as comparable to human beings. By this logic, if a disabled fetus should be rejected then so should a disabled person. But this highlights their inconsistency: whilst many MPs and some anti-abortionists agree that disabled fetuses should be aborted they do not call for 'death to the disabled'. They thus concede that the criteria by which society judges fetuses are different to those by which we judge living social individuals.

Undoubtedly there are many disabled people who have managed to live full and creative lives. That people have overcome the limitations imposed on them by their bodies is testimony to their spirit, and reason to take them seriously. But to conclude from this that we should create more people with the same limitations is both self-defeating and selfish.

Paul Johnson *Bristol*

1956 and all that

Andrew Calcutt's report from the Communist Party's conference on 1956 (August) was interesting but I think there are lessons to be learnt. It's not just an opportunity to laugh at some poor old fogeys who can't face up to the fact that they have devoted their lives to a myth—the myth that the USSR was on the road to communism.

I remember the revelations of the twentieth congress CPSU(B) very clearly. I too had thought that defending the world's first workers' state was a priority. However, I had the excuse of not really knowing—we suspected that all was not right, but unless you were higher up the party, you did not know much more than the average *Daily Express* reader, and that's not much! But a lot of the higher-ups did know. They knew the confessions were false. They personally knew people who had disappeared to the firing squad or to the Siberian labour camps.

I attended the meeting of my CP branch addressed by John Gollan, then general secretary, to discuss the twentieth congress and the revelations printed (I think) in the *Observer*. He made a typically long statement which said almost nothing but passed on the Khrushchev message that there had been 'mistakes'. It was clear that he, and some other leading comrades at the meeting, knew about these in the 1930s. I suggested that as we regarded ourselves as the Soviet Union's best friend, it was our duty to criticise if we saw mistakes being made, just as it's only your best friend who will tell you your breath smells. He did not accept this!

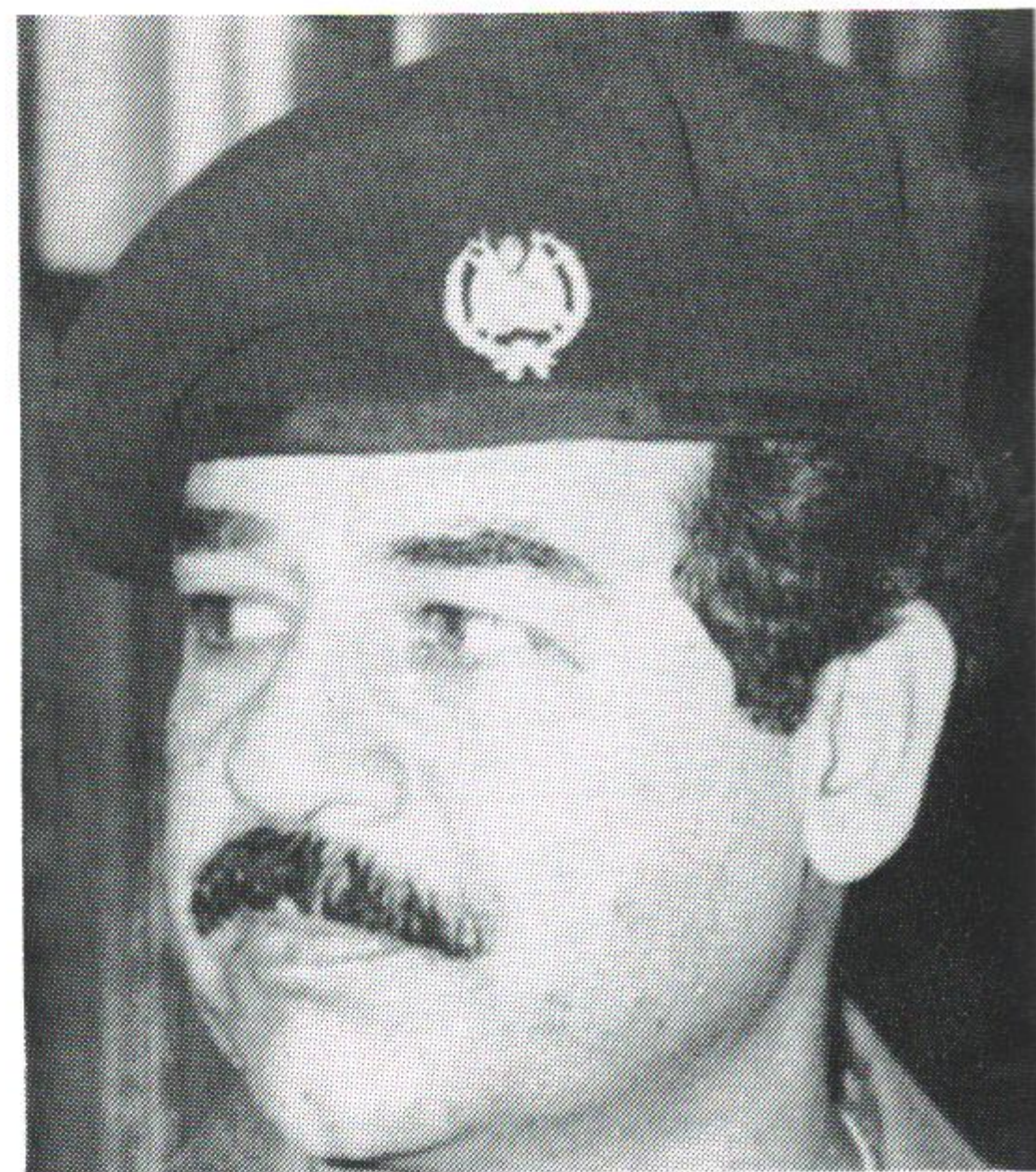
I still think that we were correct to support the world's first anti-capitalist state initially—but support that involves wholesale lying becomes counterproductive. That is the lesson that many of us on the left have to learn.

Bill Thornycroft (ex-member of the CPGB)
London

then and now

September 1980–September 1990:
the USA and Iraq

From bosom pals to mortal enemies



Today Saddam Hussein is the devil incarnate according to George Bush. Ten years ago he was a staunch ally of the USA. Jill Gordon charts the changes in US policy towards Iraq

Ten years ago this month, the USA gave the thumbs up to Iraq's Saddam Hussein to attack Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. So began the Gulf War which was to last eight years and cost a million lives. A decade later, the Middle East is once again poised on the brink of war, but this time the tables are turned against Iraq. Once seen as a friend of America, Saddam Hussein is now depicted as a latter-day Adolf Hitler. This shift in US policy towards Iraq has got nothing to do with the changing personality of Saddam Hussein: it has been dictated by the changing requirements of US imperialism in the Middle East.

The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 was a stunning blow for the USA. Iran under the Shah had been a faithful client state and a bulwark of imperialist interests in the Gulf. His removal upset the whole structure of imperialist domination in the Middle East. Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in channelling the anti-imperialist aspirations of the Iranian masses into support for the new Islamic state by fulminating against 'the Great Satan' in Washington. The seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and the ensuing hostage crisis was the ultimate humiliation for the USA. President Jimmy Carter's spectacularly unsuccessful attempt to rescue the hostages demonstrated to the world that the USA could no longer function effectively as the global policeman for imperialist interests in the Middle East.

The USA was particularly concerned that the threat to stability in the region be contained within the borders of Iran. It therefore set about the search for new client states which could help stabilise the situation. Initially, Iraq was not well disposed towards the West. It had severed ties with the USA in 1967, when Washington had supported Israel in the Six Day War. However, by early 1980, US intelligence officers were holding meetings with their opposite numbers in Iraq. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the USA encouraged Iraq to take advantage of the internal upheaval in Iran and make a bid for leadership of the Gulf states.

US hypocrisy

Washington's recent pious statements denouncing Iraqi military aggression against neighbouring states are sheer hypocrisy: the USA effectively organised the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980. As one orthodox analyst cautiously suggested, at the very least the USA gave Iraq the nod to attack Iran: 'While the precise extent to which the United States was the author of Iraq's decision to invade Iran remains uncertain, that the US government both encouraged and sought to profit from the invasion is almost certain.' (GF Rose, 'Fools rush in: American policy and the Iran-Iraq War 1980-88', in ME Ahrari, *The Gulf and International Security: The 1980s and Beyond*, 1989, p90)

A flurry of diplomatic activity preceded the invasion of Iran. US intelligence officials met representatives of Saddam Hussein's regime. Washington sent secret information via its ally Saudi Arabia, which exaggerated the military weakness of the new regime in Tehran, and encouraged the Iraqis to mount an attack. The USA welcomed the Iraqi-provoked skirmishes along the Iran-Iraq border in mid-September 1980. When they escalated into war, Washington could not conceal its delight at the blow delivered against the fledgling regime in Tehran. As one CIA official stated, 'the Iraqis had Iran by the balls, and that permitted us to gently squeeze'.

At every stage of the war, the USA manipulated each belligerent to suit its own interests. Washington was not enthusiastic about Iraq becoming the dominant regional power, believing that its interests would be best served by a prolonged conflict which would wear down both sides. Thus while it openly supplied weapons to Iraq, it secretly exported arms to Iran. When the first phase of the war ended in a stalemate, the Americans were happy with the result: 'A stalemate in the Iran-Iraq War would probably suit our interests more than outright Iraqi victory.' (*Wall Street Journal*, 24 October 1980)

Whenever one side looked like making a decisive breakthrough, the USA moved swiftly to redress the

balance. By early 1982, Iran had begun to consolidate its position. It launched a series of offensives against Iraq, scoring successive victories and winning back territory. By early 1983, the sudden prospect of an Iranian victory alarmed Washington. As Iraq's position grew more precarious, the USA tilted the scales towards Baghdad and restricted arms supplies to Tehran.

US president Ronald Reagan removed Iraq from his list of 'states supporting international terrorism'. At the start of 1983, Washington established senior diplomatic contacts with Iraq; 60 helicopters were sent 'for agricultural use'; \$2 billion in US credits and loans were extended to prop up the economy; and full diplomatic relations were restored in late 1984.

The suicide bombing which killed 259 US marines in Beirut in October 1983 gave Washington an excuse for piling more pressure on Tehran. The USA blamed Iran for the attack and it joined the list of pariah nations as the 'ultimate terrorist state' in 1984. Washington turned a blind eye to Iraqi attacks on shipping in the Gulf, while condemning any retaliation by Iran as a barbaric attack on the freedom of the seas.

Bloody stalemate

Despite the assistance it was getting from the West, Iraq could not prevail decisively against Iran. As the war settled down to another bloody stalemate, the USA and Iraq came to a secret agreement that should Baghdad require help in stabilising the border, Washington would assist militarily. US defence secretary Caspar Weinberger justified the tilt towards Iraq in forthright terms: 'We want to see the war end in a way that doesn't destabilise the area....An Iranian victory is certainly not in our national interest.' (Quoted in S Chubin and C Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 1989, p208)

Iran was being starved of weapons and parts which seriously weakened its capacity to withstand the military onslaught from Iraq. In these circumstances, Tehran began to make overtures towards Washington. Always eager to improve relations with a more compliant Iran, the USA put pressure on Iraq to scale down its relentless attacks. In response, Iran opened a dialogue with the USA's Gulf allies, mediated in the TWA airline hostage crisis and hinted at restoring normal relations. This was the period in which the infamous arms-for-hostages negotiations began between the USA and Iran.

In 1986, Iran went on the offensive and captured the Fao peninsula. It broke through the Iraqi defences and was pounding its opponent to the

point of collapse. Seeing the balance in the war tipping out of its control once again, Washington prepared to redress the balance. A report by the house of representatives armed services committee noted the essential component of US strategy in the Gulf War: 'A minimal requirement was to see that Iraq does not collapse.' At this point however, the USA's underhand dealings with Iran were exposed in the most embarrassing fashion.

In December 1986, the Beirut newspaper *ash-Shiraa* exposed details of the arms-for-hostages negotiations and all the nefarious, inept and bungling attempts at rapprochement with the Iranians. These revelations were a severe embarrassment for the USA, which was shown to have been doing secret deals with a state which it had denounced in public as a refuge for terrorists. The 'Irangate' scandal had a devastating effect on the credibility and prestige of the government in Washington. On the defensive, the USA abandoned any policy which might be construed as seeking a rapprochement with Iran.

Target Iran

When the USS *Stark* was accidentally hit by an *Iraqi* missile in May 1987, the USA seized the opportunity to go on the offensive against *Iran*. Targeting Iran as a menace to the freedom of the seas in the Gulf, and as a threat to the interests of its allies in the West, Washington internationalised the conflict and sent in a task force. In July, it reflagged Kuwaiti tankers and escorted them out of the Gulf.

In July 1987, UN resolution 598 called for both sides to observe a ceasefire. Iraq accepted, Iran delayed. Iraq resumed the tanker war and drew the imperialist powers further into the conflict on its behalf. In September, the USA had its first engagement with Iranian shipping. In October, Washington cut off all trade with Iran and signed a five-year trade expansion deal with Iraq.

Iraq went in for the kill against a prostrate Iran in 1988, bombing Tehran with long-range missiles. Once again, Iran made overtures to the USA in an attempt to resume a dialogue. The US ambassador Vernon Walters was despatched to Baghdad to plead for the acceptance of resolution 598. But Iraq was not interested in holding back then. The USA intervened to force a settlement at the expense of Iran. In June 1988, Iraq repulsed a last-ditch offensive and brought Iran to its knees. On 3 July 1988, the USS *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian passenger airbus, killing the 298 Iranians on board. Two weeks later, Iran accepted resolution 598.

Once Iran had been vanquished by Iraq, the USA changed its attitude towards the two states. In order to establish a balance of power which was favourable to its own interests in the Middle East, Washington set about developing closer relations with Iran, while obstructing Iraq's attempts to expand its influence further. Since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Washington has been ingratiating itself with the new regime in Tehran. The USA's lucrative reconstruction contracts, hostage negotiations and earthquake aid are all part of a package designed to cement a new relationship with Iran.

Meanwhile, the USA became increasingly hostile towards its former ally Iraq. In September 1988, Iraq used chemical weapons against the Kurds. Washington, which had ignored their use against Iran during the Gulf War, immediately imposed economic sanctions against Iraq. In the following months, America stepped up its campaign against Iraq. In January 1989, the USA and Israel alleged that Iraq had biological as well as chemical weapons and launched a worldwide propaganda offensive against Saddam Hussein.

Iraq branded

In March 1990, Iraq executed British journalist Farzad Bazoft for allegedly spying on a military complex. After the Bazoft execution, Britain and America claimed to have uncovered a plot to smuggle electronic capacitors from the USA via London to Iraq. In Britain and Greece, police seized parts supposedly destined for a big gun which was being assembled secretly in Iraq. Although it soon became clear that the government had known about the big gun affair all along, highly charged media reports targeted Iraq as the new threat to world peace. Saddam Hussein was branded as the new public enemy number one well before he sent his forces into Kuwait in August.

At the start of the eighties, Iran was presented as the major threat to world peace in the Middle East. At the start of the nineties, Iraq has been depicted as the aggressor in the Gulf. The enemy as defined by imperialism may have changed, but then and now the object of US policy was and is to make the Middle East safe for imperialism by declaring war on an upstart third world regime which threatens to upset the balance of power. In September 1980, that meant shaking hands with Saddam Hussein; in September 1990, it means setting him up as the mortal enemy of the free world.



Staying alive

Who's afraid of the mad axemen?

Ann Bradley on fears and threats, irrational and otherwise

It's funny the way that fear works. You can know your fear is completely irrational yet still get into a panic about it. Every time I have to use the London Underground late at night I'm as nervous as a kitten. I read conspicuously to avoid having to look at anyone—let alone speak to them. I always try to use compartments populated by couples or other women. And if anyone looks as though they're eyeing me up, I pick my nose. When I get out of the tube I use well-lit main roads, and when I have to turn into backstreets I walk down the middle of the road, so no one can ambush me from behind parked cars. And when I arrive home to an empty house I've even been known to bellow 'Hello, I'm back!' to deter anyone who might be lurking in the shadows. Crazy behaviour, or sensible precautions?

Well, it is certainly true that you can't be too careful. There are certainly nutters who prowl the streets of London. But our fears are based on the hype that surrounds the threat of violence on the streets, more than our experience of it. I'm not saying that it doesn't happen, and I'm not trying to belittle the experience of those women who have been attacked. But let's get things into perspective.

Last year 896 women reported being raped in London. Yet statistical breakdowns suggest that only a minority of those women were raped in the kind of situations we all worry about—the tube station, or the badly lit road. A recent home office report shows that of reported rapes, a third of women were attacked by men who they 'knew intimately', a third were attacked by men with whom they had some acquaintance (often men they knew at work), and only a third were raped by the stranger we all fear. The message may well be that we should worry less about the man on the underground and worry more about the man in the staff canteen.

But you wouldn't know that from the way these figures tend to be reported. Especially during the press 'silly season' in the summer it's impossible to open a newspaper without being warned about some gruesome happening. Women of London have recently been warned to be on their guard against some lunatic who strangled two women and drove about with them in his car for the best part of a day. We share the terror of a woman who woke up to find a hooded man trying to break through her skylight with an axe. We are warned against sleeping naked with the curtains open in case some passing drunk cannot contain his lust. And the police have issued a free chatty little

booklet on how to secure your home against intruders. Not all of the reporting is lurid and titillating. Some of it is very worthy. A number of women's magazines have taken up campaigns for women's safety on the street.

But why all the big concern with the bogeyman? If you want to worry about personal safety your fears would be far more aptly directed against the fear of accidents in the home. A recent BMA report notes that 'during a three-month survey period, one per cent of all males and two per cent of females had an accident at home sufficient in severity to cause attendance at a hospital or doctor's surgery'. This roughly translates into an annual risk of one in 12 (women) and one in 25 (men) of suffering an injury at home that needs treatment. You're much more likely to clobber yourself in the privacy of your own home than you are to be injured by someone else outside of it.

This is not as flippant as it sounds. Around 600 people, most of them elderly, die each year in Britain of mishaps on the stairs—how much did we hear about these deaths? This is *double* the number who died as a result of 'homicide and injury purposefully inflicted by other people'. Yet ask old people what they fear most, the stairs or a murderer, and you can bet your bottom dollar it won't be the stairs.

But accidents are accidents, I hear you say. They're not the same as when people are deliberately murdered. Sometimes that's right. But let me tell you about the personal safety problems of a friend of mine.

Jane, my 80-year old friend and neighbour, has had two long stays in hospital in the past three years. The last one was the result of a fall. She was hanging out her washing when she fell and hit her head on the patio. She cut her head badly, was dazed, tried to get up and fell again. When she was spotted by the children next door she was lying, barely conscious, in a pool of blood. Fortunately the kids alerted their parents who called an ambulance and broke into the house to look after Jane for the 30 minutes before the ambulance arrived. An unavoidable accident—perhaps. But I don't think so. Why is an unsteady elderly woman left to do her washing on her own? Why hasn't the local authority provided her with a home help, or the kind of sheltered accommodation she would *want* to move into? How many of the elderly who die in 'accidents' around the home have effectively been killed by cuts in social services?

Jane's previous stay in hospital was to have a

heart bypass operation. Another very real brush with death. Suffering from severe angina she was warned that unless she had a bypass operation the doctors would give her only six months to live. Unfortunately for Jane there was an 18-month NHS waiting list. So unless she could find several thousand pounds to 'go private' it was curtains. After tense weeks trying to get a second mortgage on her house—which no one would give her because of her age—her daughter managed to raise the money and Jane's operation was carried out in the relative luxury of the now notorious Humana Hospital. Jane now has a lot of debts, but at least she's alive. If her daughter hadn't been so resourceful Jane would now be dead. The statistics would say she died of heart disease—natural causes. I would say she had been killed by the underfunding of the NHS.

There is very real violence against individuals in our society. The problem is that most of it goes unnoticed. Nick Ross can stir hundreds of people to phone into *Crimewatch* to report that their neighbour looks a bit like the photofit of this week's 'mad axeman'. But there's no equivalent campaign to get those responsible for the deaths of people like Jane.

What's worse is that people are so accustomed to this kind of story that we are no longer outraged. We bolt our windows against the rapist, whose attack is unlikely, while we accept the real threats to life and limb as facts of life. The recent death of yet another Channel Tunnel worker was given less than three minutes of news time and has quickly been forgotten. Had he been carved into small pieces by a mad axeman the papers would have run 'exclusive' reports for days. Yet for us his death is more significant. Every year in the region of 100 construction workers are killed and another 2000 are seriously injured—how many people are cut up by axemen?

The authorities like the one-off individual horror stories. They give them the excuse to argue for more police on the street. The media likes them because they're sensational and sell papers. We have to get them into perspective. You're more likely to be run over than you are to be raped—I know that, but I'll still walk in the middle of the road on my way home.

• *The BMA Guide to Living with Risk*, Penguin, £5.99 pbk

The Personal Column is open to all *Living Marxism* readers, to provide a platform for your opinion on anything from pit bull terriers or the poll tax to Norman Tebbit or New Men.

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In this month's Personal Column...

What's so bad about boxing?

Joe Watson defends the noble art

Boxing is my sport. No other sport comes close. I have little or no patience with those who go on about the brutality of boxing. Or worse still those who call for boxing to be banned.

Henry Cooper, and this is the only mention he will get, expressed the correct sort of sentiment in an exchange with boxing abolitionist Baroness Summerskill in a televised debate a few years ago:

'Mr Cooper, have you looked in the mirror lately and seen the state of your nose?'

'Well madam, have you looked in the mirror and seen the state of your nose? Boxing's my excuse. What's yours?'

After all who are they to lecture on violence? These self-appointed 'moral guardians' who stick their intrusive noses into everything are the same people who live by a code which fully endorses and supports the actions of the police, the courts, the army and everything else that protects their position in society. This has always been an aspect of boxing, the most comfortable canting and whining in hypocritical fashion.

It is after all a stupid notion that banning boxing will change the level or nature of violence in the world. You will change nothing by getting rid of boxing. Violence is endemic in our society. It is one of the building blocks of society, the cement that ultimately holds things together for those in power. To try to deny its relevance would be like denying gravity.

Killers at play

And these same self-appointed moral policemen who go on about the brutal nature of boxing have very little to say about their own contact sports. They have no objections to the considerable violence meted out on the rugby field. A rough and violent team game (rugby union that is) that at the top level is played by top policemen and army officers—sort of killers at play.

In 1984 the American Medical Association compiled a sort of league table of dangerous sports. The following were found to pose more risk to life and limb than boxing: football (the American sort), motor racing, hang-gliding, mountain climbing and ice hockey. Boxing was in about seventh place. But they still single out boxing for their abolition campaign.

Boxing is an easy target. It does not have the influential defenders which other contact sports have. Boxing hasn't got the American college system behind it, like gridiron football has, or the mysticism, sandals, humility and brown rice which the martial arts have going for them. Instead its sophisticated critics object to what they call the unique 'ugliness' of boxing, and describe even top boxers as 'savages' or 'monsters'.

These 'sensitive' people hate the fact that boxing is really a caricature of capitalism. The fact that boxing pitches one individual against another in a struggle for superiority, setting out to destroy each other, makes them feel uneasy. Individuals out to do down others for a prize and a price. What better metaphor for this society? Those are the sort of things these people don't like to be reminded of. For the more comfortable middle classes who can afford to gain a certain distance from the harsh and often brutal reality of working class life, the fact that boxing exists, and what's more can find its way through the TV into their living rooms, is too much to bear.

Boxing may well be dangerous. But so what? So is working in construction, or down the mines. Boxing is one way out of all that, to get a bit of respect. It beats working in a warehouse any day, the pay is a lot better and what's more it keeps you fit.

Of course the way boxing is organised is also a caricature of capitalism. The boxer is 'owned' by the promoter and manager. They control every aspect of the fighter's life. They dictate when he can sleep, when he trains, what he eats, when he can socialise, even when he can have sex (it is traditional for boxers to abstain from sex months before a major bout). They make the boxer dance to their tune in terms of who he will fight and when. The purse for a bout is shared out between fighter, manager and promoter, often with the promoter getting the bulk and the fighter getting the least. It's only when you get to the top like Mike Tyson that you can no longer be treated like a piece of meat and you have more control over your career. Even Tyson now belongs to Don King, the number one promoter and Mr Fix-it of the modern fight game hated and feted as the wheeler-dealer who makes you or breaks you.

From its earliest days boxing always contained the element of corruption and behind the scenes fixing. In the old days you could lose your life after

fighting for 96 rounds (Simon Byrne in 1832) performing for the toffs. Not much has changed. No bouts run up to 96 rounds but we still have the toffs even if they are more likely to be Frank Sinatra than the aristocracy.

Despite all this, boxing is one of the most compelling sports to watch. The body put through the most rigorous training (Rocky Marciano used to go into seclusion to train three months before a bout) and then put to the ultimate test. The agility, cleverness, courage, power and control displayed as two men stalk each other in a ring can hold you spellbound. Boxers above any other sportsmen exhibit the most supreme composure under pressure (unlike rugby union players who always seem to lose their cool). For it is only in boxing that you see displayed that balance between disciplined self-control and hot-blooded passion.

If you're a streetfighter or a bully you will never be a boxer. The boxing world has never been interested in the psychopathic element. To be a boxer you must be composed and disciplined with a body to match—a boxer's body, not a body-builder's physique like 'Rocky' Stallone, a sort of comic-book boxer.

Black, smart and cocky

If I have a complaint about boxing it is that today's boxers seem more tame and boring than in the past. Take Muhammad Ali's career. Hated anyway by the white boxing establishment for being black, smart and cocky, Ali's refusal to go to Vietnam made him the target of a hate campaign which drove the best boxer of all time out of the ring when he was at his peak. And what a boxer. When he took the heavyweight title off Sonny Liston back in 1964 he fought like a lightweight. Refusing to slug it out toe to toe with the 'bear' he brought artistry into the heavyweight ring. He could circle and dance and shuffle and move. 'I'm so fast', said Ali, 'I can turn out the light and be in bed before it's dark'.

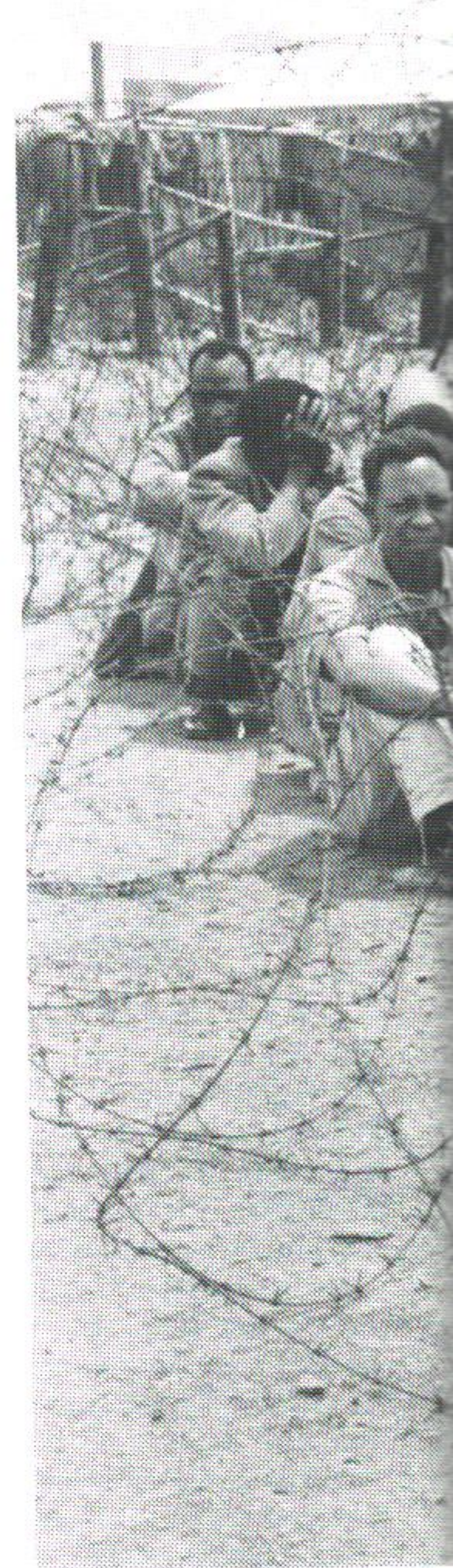
Today there are no new Alis or Fraziers or Haglers. Since the proliferation of titles through the eighties top boxing has become much more of a circus. Even clowns like Bruno get a shot at the title. At least Bruno looks like he has retired. We wait to see if Tyson can regain some of his early form. In the meantime there are always my memories and my fight videos.

Conspiracies and ceasefires

Beware of imperialist plots

What's the connection
between the alleged communist plot
and the ceasefire
declaration in South Africa?

Charles Longford investigates



At the end of July, allegations by the security police that the South African Communist Party (SACP) was plotting an insurrection should the negotiations between the apartheid regime and the African National Congress collapse stunned political observers. When president FW De Klerk asked Nelson Mandela to drop SACP leader Joe Slovo from the ANC negotiating team because he was implicated in the plot, everybody anticipated either the end of the alliance between the two organisations or the collapse of the negotiations. As it turned out, Slovo produced his passport showing he was in Zambia at the time when the alleged plot was supposedly hatched. Exonerated, Slovo remained in the negotiating team and the talks went ahead as planned. So what was all the fuss about?

In an editorial entitled 'Keystone Cops II', the daily paper *Business Day* said the government had made a blunder of epic proportions. It accused the police of relying on false

information and indulging in 'sloppy analysis' and 'hysterical overreaction'. The 'amateurishness' of the security services was described as 'breathtaking'. Meanwhile, the liberal opposition Democratic Party questioned whether the red plot allegations were really the result of ineptitude. Perhaps they were a more insidious 'attempt by the security establishment to derail the negotiation process and discredit prominent participants in the pre-negotiation talks'.

The significance of the insurrectionary plot episode has been missed altogether. The behaviour of the security establishment was not the result of sloppy analysis; nor was it an attempt to derail the negotiation process. On the contrary, *the manufactured plot was an intrinsic element of the negotiation process which everybody is so keen to maintain*. It was entirely in keeping with the dual strategy being pursued by the apartheid state in relation to the black liberation movement.

This strategy was spelled out in seven theses by the Revolutionary Communist Party, published in this magazine in April. Thesis number four began as follows:

'The strategy of the South African ruling class is straightforward. It hopes to neutralise the liberation movement by drawing the leadership—or at least sections of the leadership—into a protracted process of negotiations. Its aim is to moderate the leadership of the black majority. To this end, the regime is prepared to make concessions to cooperative African nationalist leaders. De Klerk expects to draw a section of the African leadership into a relationship with the state, while isolating those who prove immune to compromise. The carrot will be used to reward moderation, while the stick will be used to repress and isolate militants.' ('No time for euphoria', *Living Marxism*, April 1990)

Seen from this perspective, the red plot affair made perfect sense from the point of view of the ruling class. It was intended as a first step in opening up a rift in the liberation movement between the moderates with whom the state can do business, and the militants who will be treated as pariahs.

There should have been no surprise about the apartheid regime's use of a fictitious red plot to sow divisions in



PHOTO: Bert Hardy/Hulton

Mau Mau radicals interned under the state of emergency in 1952: Britain's experiment in grooming a moderate black elite in Kenya serves as a model for the South African regime today

the nationalist camp. Such intrigue has been a central component of imperialist strategy in Africa. In fact, the British imperial authorities invented the communist plot ruse in the course of pursuing their decolonisation strategy in Africa. On each occasion the aim of the exercise was to foment divisions in the liberation movement and groom a moderate nationalist leadership. A brief look at some of these historical examples will hopefully throw light on the dangers that lie ahead for the liberation struggle in South Africa.

One thing that links the latest insurrectionary plot allegations with similar episodes in the past is that they were entirely fictitious. According to the British authorities, they declared a state of emergency in Malaya in June 1948 in response to a Moscow or Beijing-inspired plot to seize power. In Kenya, in October 1952, Britain justified imposing a state of emergency on the grounds that a centrally organised movement of tribal subversives had organised a violent conspiracy. Whitehall announced that the suspension of the constitution in British Guiana in October 1953 was essential to prevent a communist overthrow of the state.

Again in Kenya in 1962, the British invented the existence of the Kenya Land Free Army and claimed to have evidence that it was 'engaged in a deliberate plan to provoke civil war after the country had attained independence' (see F Füredi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective*, 1989).

The British colonial authorities never produced any evidence to support their lurid claims. This was not surprising since the conspiracies did not exist. The ever more fanciful allegations were not the result of blunders, misinformation or hysteria. Documentary evidence exists which proves that the colonial office deliberately manufactured these stories in order to justify an immediate military clampdown against national liberation forces fighting imperialism. Each discovery of an insurrectionary plot was followed by mass arrests and detentions.

This provides another parallel with what happened recently in South Africa. Immediately after the security police went public with their red plot allegations, they arrested 150 ANC cadres including senior executive member Sathyandranath 'Mac' Maharaj under security legislation.

However, the state authorities do not invent communist conspiracies simply to provide a propaganda cover for *military* repression. In fact, the states of emergency in Malaya, Kenya and British Guiana were not necessarily imposed to deal with popular rebellions which were getting out of hand. Above all, the state was attempting to resolve the problem of *political control*. In South Africa today, the red plot that never was should be seen as part and parcel of a similar process. And this is where the real plot thickens.

British imperialism's management of nationalist protests in the colonies provides a crucial insight into the thinking behind the apartheid regime's approach today. In the post-war period, the British realised that they had to change the old way of doing things in the colonies if they were to protect imperialist interests there. They evolved a strategy of coopting popular nationalist leaders to help manage the process of decolonisation in a manner which was beneficial to imperialism: splitting the liberation movement and promoting moderate nationalism became the favoured approach of the colonial authorities.

Engineering splits

Thus the successive states of emergency in the colonies were not primarily military operations. The military aspect of these emergencies was always subordinate to the political objective of splitting the nationalist movements. In Kenya, the declaration of a state of emergency was simply the first step in the construction of a system of political institutions which could guarantee capitalist social relations after decolonisation. The government was most concerned to create the conditions for the emergence of a moderate nationalist leadership. After crushing the radical forces of the Mau Mau, the British set about grooming a black political elite which would serve the interests of imperialism rather than the interests of the mass movement against imperialism.

The South African scenario is no exception to the general pattern described above. The violent suppression of the mass struggles of the fifties and sixties, the banning of political organisations and the jailing of nationalist leaders like Nelson Mandela allowed the regime to experiment with fostering an alternative moderate African leadership: the homeland leaders. Although the state never relaxed repression, it tried to expand this layer of compliant leaders through the creation of the tricameral

1 September
4 October 1990

TELEVISION

19:41:90

INTERVENTIONS

Ecstatic
Antibodies

RESISTING THE AIDS MYTHOLOGY

An exhibition of videos produced for television by leading British and European artists including David Mach, Alistair MacLennan, Bruce McLean, Rose Garrard, Pratibha Parmar, Stephen Partridge and Raul Rodriguez.

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Photographs, installations, tape-slide and video challenging the mythology that the media, law and medicine have constructed around AIDS. Artists include Tessa Boffin, Allan de Souza, Lynn Hewett, Sunil Gupta, David Ruffell, Isaac Julien, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Alex Hirst.

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south africa

parliament in the late seventies, which brought coloured and Indian moderates into the political process. However, the explosion of unrest in the mid-eighties brought home to the regime that these leaders could never sell a reformed apartheid to the black masses who regarded them as stooges.

For two decades, the apartheid regime has sought to contain the revolt of the black masses, which began to threaten the system in the early seventies, through a strategy of reform as well as repression. However, until now the authorities have lacked a credible black leadership through which they can reorganise the system of capitalist domination. The release of Nelson Mandela, the unbanning of the ANC and other organisations and the promise of negotiations over the future of South Africa are the first steps on the road to constructing such a black nationalist leadership.

It is worth emphasising that although mass resistance is the cause of the government's reform strategy, the deliberate timing of recent developments is the result of other factors. First, the mass movement has experienced a decline over the past three years and has been significantly weakened in comparison to the early eighties. There can be no doubt that the moves towards negotiations were motivated by the conviction that the apartheid regime has consolidated its position. Pretoria is confident that it can negotiate from a position of strength with the representatives of the black majority. In other words, the current balance of forces favours the government.

Stalinist collapse

Second, recent developments must be seen in the broader context of the international consolidation of the forces of imperialism. The collapse of Stalinism and the retreat of the Soviet Union from the third world have given imperialism more room for manoeuvre. Although the Soviet Union never played a progressive role, its very existence as an alternative ally for national liberation movements was always an obstacle to imperialism having a free hand in the third world. The impact of the disintegration of the Stalinist bloc on third world liberation struggles has been forcefully demonstrated in Namibia, where imperialism was able to impose a neo-colonial solution with relative ease. In South Africa, Stalinism's moral collapse has had a moderating effect on the South African Communist Party and the ANC. In these circumstances, Pretoria has concluded that it now has little to fear from radical anti-

capitalist forces and can afford to be more relaxed about how it supervises its affairs. This means that the ruling class can go quite a long way in modifying the present apartheid set-up.

This is the context in which the apartheid government is attempting to neutralise the liberation movement by drawing the moderates into a protracted process of negotiations. Unfortunately, Pretoria has already scored some significant victories in its attempt to integrate a section of the black leadership and isolate the militants. The striking aspect of the communist plot affair was the accommodating response of Nelson Mandela.

Mandela's immediate reaction to the security force swoop on black activists was to say that the arrests were unlikely to affect the negotiations. The fact that he hardly raised any objection to the arrest of his own cadres could only have the effect of legitimising the state's attempt to criminalise militants which was the original purpose of the fictitious red plot. Mandela's response indicates how the apartheid regime has already gone some way towards drawing him into a relationship with the state and isolating those sections of the movement who are less predisposed towards compromise.

Historic concession

If this point was not grasped previously, it should have been made devastatingly clear by the upshot of the negotiations which followed the red plot affair. In an historic concession to the apartheid regime, the ANC negotiators agreed to suspend the armed struggle without wringing an equivalent concession from FW De Klerk. This was significant not because the armed struggle amounts to anything; indeed it ceased to exist as a real threat a long time ago. The ANC's ceasefire offer was significant because it lends credence to the state's criminalisation policy by putting on record the illegitimacy of militant struggle against apartheid. Furthermore, the ceasefire concession hands the state a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. While the ANC surrendered the right to engage in armed struggle, the government refused to repeal security legislation under which black activists have been detained indefinitely or to lift the state of emergency in Natal, which has been used as a cover for state violence on a massive scale.

The pressure applied by the regime to get Joe Slovo dropped from the ANC negotiating team was also notable. This more than anything else

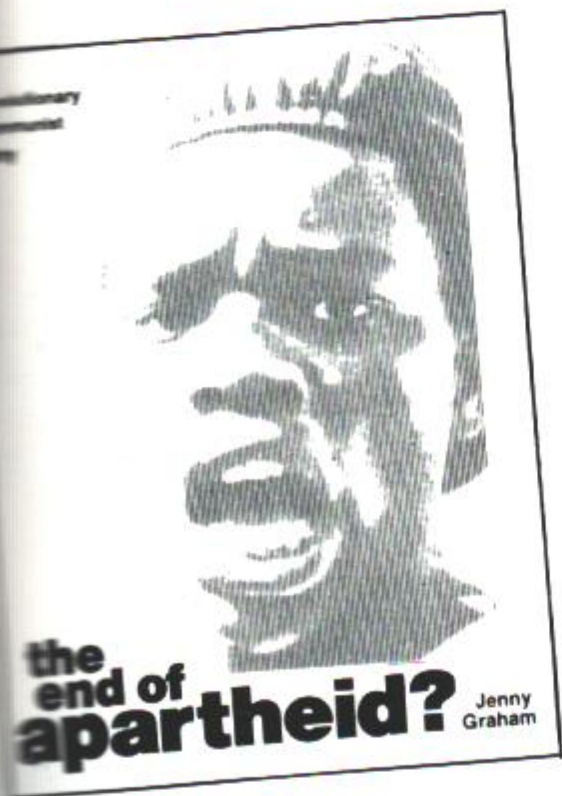
was an attempt by the government to see how far it could go in dividing the movement. It is only necessary to recall the historical importance of the relationship between the ANC and the South African Communist Party to grasp the import of this move.

The alliance between the two organisations has been the means by which the contradictory class forces involved in the struggle against apartheid have been held together. The middle class leaders of the ANC have always relied upon their links with the official communist movement to endow them with a radical image which could attract a working class constituency. By stirring up divisions between the ANC and the SACP, Pretoria is hoping to split the movement between the moderates and the radicals. In addition, the government hopes to individualise the political process and insulate moderate nationalist leaders from the mass movement.

Moderation rules

The apartheid regime is having everything its own way so far because moderation is the order of the day. Ironically, the responsibility for this state of affairs lies with the SACP. The collapse of Stalinism has meant that the project of radical social transformation is increasingly seen as a non-starter in South Africa. Stalinists like Joe Slovo are now telling black workers that there is no alternative to capitalism in South Africa. In this situation, it is relatively easy for the state to isolate radicalism and promote moderation as the way to get results.

There are grave dangers ahead for the mass movement in South Africa. The fate of the liberation struggle depends on whether black workers are prepared to accept the compromises being made by the moderate leadership. Not surprisingly, there is a growing sense of unease among black radicals about the concessions being made by the ANC. If Mandela and the rest are prepared to give away so much at this stage of the game, what will they do when the real negotiations get under way? So far, the reservations voiced by black militants have had little consequence because nobody has called into question the political strategy being pursued by Mandela. Unless an alternative political programme is developed which is based on the interests of the black working class in overthrowing the capitalist system, the negotiation process will follow a predictably tragic course.



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soviet disunion

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orld exports of machines and equipment increased by 50 per cent during the period 1986-89 but Soviet exports increased by only 11 per cent...why is this happening? The main thing is that we have nothing to trade.'

Why Gorbachev can't solve the crisis

This comment by a representative of the Soviet government says much about the condition of the economy in the sixth year of perestroika. The government has admitted that output is falling and consumer goods are more scarce than ever. Perestroika has not only failed to improve matters, it has made things worse. The Soviet establishment is now issuing increasingly desperate calls for help from the West.

The Kremlin likes to blame the failure of economic reform on lazy workers or corrupt lower officials. But the cause is more fundamental. The restructuring process has failed to overcome the central defect built into the Soviet economy. Before looking at the economic crisis today, it is worth asking just what this system is that both Stalinists and capitalists call socialism.

The historical problem is that the Soviet system has no efficient way of organising the labour-time of society. Two ways have been discovered for doing this in a modern economy. The first is capitalism. In a market economy competition between different firms tends to drive inefficient producers out of business. This frees the labour and resources of

the inefficient and makes them available for more productive use. In this way capitalism has been responsible for introducing new technology and raising productivity.

However, capitalism cannot consistently raise the level of productive forces because of its inbuilt tendency to go through cycles of crisis. In the twentieth century these crises and the intensified competition they provoke have resulted in slumps, mass unemployment and world wars. The fact that production is for profit rather than human need also means that large areas of the world have not benefited from capitalism at all, and that the threat or reality of extreme poverty and starvation is never far away.

In response to these problems Marxists have sought an alternative way of organising society. By eliminating private property and the profit motive, we can remove the barriers which capitalism throws up to the development and use of technology to meet human need. This will require both an anti-capitalist revolution, and the creation of a new society run by the majority of its members.

Workers' management

By taking direct control over all aspects of production, distribution and consumption ordinary people can make sure that resources are being used efficiently and that the real needs of society are being met. This is what we might call workers' management, and it requires a political system which puts the working class in the saddle.

These are the two systems for organising production. The Soviet Union, however, is run on neither



capitalist nor Marxist principles. Capitalism was eradicated by the 1930s with the collectivisation of land and the nationalisation of all factories. At the same time the Soviet bureaucracy under Stalin took all power into its own hands, destroying the possibility of creating a society run by the masses. The Soviet Union came to be dominated by a growing

The republics are revolting, the harvests are rotting, the West won't bail out the economy; whichever way you look at it, the Soviet Union is facing disaster. Rob Knight explains why the system won't work; over the page, Teresa Clarke looks at the lessons of this summer's crucial Communist Party congress

Taking the road to



bureaucracy which used state terror to consolidate its position.

In a system with neither the market nor the participation of workers in planning production, the Soviet bureaucracy cannot regulate the distribution of society's labour-time. It has had to try to plan the economy in an inefficient, top-down fashion, with little or no knowledge of what is really needed or produced. This is why the Soviet economy is infamous for squandering natural and human resources. It is why a huge, rich country has failed to keep up even with the clapped-out British economy.

Perestroika was meant to solve these problems by reintroducing the market. Under Mikhail Gorbachev,

the Soviet leadership has tried to relax central control over both the economy and the political system. As a result it has lost its iron political grip over society. In the past the bureaucracy could use its total political control to compensate for the absence of any economic regulator, at least to a degree. Now it has the worst of all worlds—no proper market and less and less political control.

This decentralisation of power has sparked the fragmentation of the Soviet Union. Today local or regional authorities ignore central instructions with impunity. The old command system is breaking down. It is not only the republics which are demanding more autonomy. Cities and regions are erecting their own pricing systems and trade barriers. The fabric of the Soviet Union is being shredded.

The Soviet leadership is now struggling to continue its decentralisation process, while at the same time it has to fall back on the

old ways to keep things moving. To gather this year's harvest, for example, the government had to resort to the old methods of central resource allocation, ordering factories to send workers into the countryside and telling the army to provide drivers. But the factories say they cannot spare the workers, and the nationality crisis has left the army 400 000 men under strength. As a consequence, a large part of what looked like a bumper harvest has been left rotting in the fields, because the old methods are breaking down, but the agricultural reforms have not created a workable market system.

Twin barriers

So why can't the Kremlin just usher in capitalism? It has been held back by two separate but related factors. The Soviet bureaucracy is afraid to attack workers' living standards. And the West has not bailed Gorbachev out.

Although the living standards of Soviet workers are low, they are guaranteed. Introducing capitalism means an end to job guarantees, subsidised food and low rents. The Soviet rulers fear a backlash if they attack these guarantees, unless they can give workers what they want in exchange: more consumer goods. This is where the West comes in. Without Western help the Kremlin cannot provide consumer goods on the scale required to sweeten the pill.

Appeals for help from the West have elicited little practical help. Western governments will all praise Gorbachev and give him political support. But putting their hands in their pockets, or encouraging Western capitalists to do so, is another matter.

The only government-backed credit of any substance so far came from the West Germans, who made clear that this was to facilitate Soviet purchases of German goods. Other governments have been even more cautious. A fragmenting state with an uncertain future is an unattractive investment proposition. Overall Western investors are cautious in today's shaky economic climate, looking for safe bets in other advanced countries rather than risky ventures.

The one area of the Soviet economy to have evoked much interest is its energy and raw materials. This year, while the total number of Western firms moving into the Soviet Union has declined, there has been increased interest in these resources. Eastern Siberia and the Caspian basin have been staked out by Western oil firms for future development. Apart from these sectors, Western interest has been confined to developing the tourist

slow market

soviet disunion

infrastructure in big cities.

The transition to capitalism is further complicated by the fact that the more the West intervenes in selected sectors of the Soviet economy, the more it will accelerate the process of fragmentation. As separate areas come under the direct influence of Western capital they will tend to break away from reliance on

the old system. By the same token, the slow rate of Western economic intervention overall means that the process of transition will be slow. The prospect is for a differential rate of development in different parts of the Soviet Union.

There is no dramatic economic improvement on the horizon. To maintain some sort of grip over

Soviet society, the bureaucracy will have to increase its reliance on political weapons such as the forces of nationalism. A growth in national, ethnic and religious conflicts seems inevitable as the Stalinists who want to be capitalists seek to blame others for the failure of the corrupt system which has shamed the name of socialism.

The twenty-eighth CPSU congress

Party games

The congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) held in July was reported in the Western press as 'the last congress'. The proceedings were said to be marked by deep ideological splits between radicals and conservatives, and president Gorbachev's leadership was supposed to be under threat. In fact, the lessons to be learnt from the conduct and outcome of the congress are quite different.

1. There were no substantial political differences

Despite all of the slow handclapping and rows, no political differences emerged. What unites the bureaucracy today is still greater than what divides it. All sections of the Communist Party recognise the need for the market—and all fear the response of the working class. Gorbachev received the support of the entire congress when he announced that unpopular bread price rises had been withdrawn.

The splits in the CPSU are fuelled much more by regional differences than political ones. The struggle over resources has fuelled the process of fragmentation, as each region and republic tries to ensure the best deal for its own territory. Nationalist movements are on the rise, with more than 140 popular fronts across the Soviet Union.

These movements can accelerate the collapse of the Soviet Union. Most party bureaucrats are throwing in their lot with those calling for full sovereignty for Russia and the Baltic states. Russian nationalism is supported by both the so-called hardliners and the radicals—they merely justify this nationalism in different ways, either as old-fashioned patriotism or as an orientation towards Western values.

The difference between 'conservatives' and 'radicals' in the CPSU is not a question of principle. The divide reflects more a differential relationship with the West. In those areas where the West is showing more interest—the Baltics, Siberia, the big cities—the bureaucracy wants to move quickly and introduce radical reforms. In the vast hinterland of Russia and the more economically impoverished areas, on the other hand, the local elites are more cautious simply because they can see no salvation from the West.

2. Power may have shifted away from the party, but it remains in Gorbachev's hands

Gorbachev managed to stay in control of the congress despite all the warnings that his position was in danger. This is because the bureaucracy can see no alternative to Gorbachev, particularly given his credit with the West. He used his strong position to emasculate the power of the politburo and give more influence to the presidential council. This is in line with Gorbachev's strategy of distancing

himself from the discredited party and concentrating on becoming a Bonapartist-style president, rising majestically above the faction-fighting within the CPSU.

As part of his strategy, Gorbachev has been widely expected to give up his job as party general secretary while retaining the state presidency. But at the congress, he decided to retain his party post too. His decision suggests that he recognises the continuing importance of keeping an 'all-union' state bureaucracy. Until the restoration of capitalism has gone much further the Soviet Union still needs the remnants of the old system of government, even though it is in the process of crumbling away.

But whatever his title and powers, Gorbachev can only postpone political chaos. The CPSU is facing an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. Having openly rejected the Stalinist model of Soviet society which it created, the party faces an identity crisis and loss of grip. The prospects are for more squabbling within the CPSU and growing reaction. Already this year 130 000 members have left the party.

3. Yeltsin leaves, but takes few with him

Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian republic, left the CPSU after the congress. His decision shows that for those with an independent power base, it makes sense to cut links with an increasingly unpopular party. Others who have left the CPSU include newly elected mayors and deputies. But for most unelected, unpopular party members, life outside the party remains an unattractive alternative.

An estimated 1000 parties and groups ranging from monarchists to anarcho-syndicalists have appeared on the political arena in the past year—even world chess champion Gary Kasparov was thinking of founding one. Informal groups have mushroomed, such as voters' clubs which act as pressure groups canvassing for different radical politicians.

However, the bureaucratic establishment is worried about what will happen if the move towards pluralism sparks an open split in the party. They understand that the party and the state are completely fused, and that the CPSU is probably the only thing holding the Soviet Union together. To date, the Stalinists' instinct for survival far outweighs the pressures pulling them apart.

Vyacheslav Shostakovsky, a leading light in the radical opposition, has argued against anyone leaving the CPSU at the present time. 'We may be planning to leave the party', he said, 'but we cannot deny that the party remains the only institution that can keep this country from disintegration'. When he forgot his own advice and left the party, he lost his job and his influence straight away.



‘Before the working class does any fighting on the barricades, first we’ve got to start winning some victories in the battle of ideas.’

Editor Mick Hume addressing the *Living Marxism* rally at the Revolutionary Communist Party’s Preparing for Power conference, July 1990

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the liverpool story

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he saga of Liverpool politics looks set to run and run. This summer, Labour councillors were again threatened with prosecution should they fail to balance the annual budget. Sacked as council leader in May, Keva Coombes committed political suicide in July by admitting that under his leadership the Labour administration accepted a tender from the council's in-house workforce, the Direct Services Organisation, although it bid twice as high as Brophy's, a London-based private contractor. Caretaker council leader Harry Rimmer faces concerted opposition from 29 left-wing councillors. In May Labour's national executive committee suspended 15 Liverpool councillors for refusing to set the poll tax rate at £449. In July the whip was withdrawn from a further 14 Labour councillors who voted against a £3 a week council house rent rise (now upped to £4 and implemented by Labour right wingers). The national executive committee also suspended Liverpool district Labour Party and Liverpool women's committee.

These latest episodes look like a direct continuation of the budget crises and rate-capping campaigns which made Liverpool a byword for militancy more than five years ago. But much has changed since the mid-eighties, when the Militant Tendency was the dominant influence in Merseyside politics.

35 000 say 'no cuts'

In the mid-eighties tens of thousands of workers thronged the city centre streets in a series of angry demonstrations against the government: 20 000 attended the Merseyside in Crisis rally; at least 35 000 closed the city and surrounded the town hall on council budget day in March 1984, demanding 'no cuts in jobs and services'. At that time, an opinion poll survey found that 55 per cent of Liverpool Labour voters would support a general strike against the Tories. The media declared the city ungovernable.

Today there are no mass demonstrations in Liverpool. A leading Labour left winger noted disconsolately, 'Once you could call a demonstration any day, any time, and 10 000 would come. Now you can't get 200 people to the town hall to protest against rent rises'. He admitted that the local anti-poll tax campaign has failed to mobilise large



Militant's Derek Hatton (thumbs up) marched workers on and off the streets like a stage army until they got tired of not having any say about how to fight their own battle

From defiance to defeat

What went wrong?

numbers of Merseysiders. The active membership of the campaign consists of left activists and hardly anyone else.

Even the Labour left veterans are falling by the wayside. One longstanding activist said that meetings of the district Labour Party (now suspended) have been inquorate for most of the past year: 'There are missing faces and it's the left wingers who are throwing away their cards.'

Another mourned the loss of 'young people who came into politics, contributed as only young people can, and then left again, disillusioned'. Isolation and defeat have bred mistrust among the left wingers who remain. Some activists, for example, 'don't believe all 29 [rebel] councillors are really against rent rises'.

Tony Jennings, spokesman for the 29 rebels who are known as the



PHOTO: David Rourke

In Liverpool in 1984,
thousands of workers
marched in support of
the city council's campaign
against the Tories; today,
local people are so demoralised
that they cannot see
the point of resisting the new
onslaught against the council.
Andrew Calcutt
looks at what went wrong

Broad Left, denied that Liverpool's Labour left is demoralised and out of touch: 'We have won every argument in the [council] Labour group, but not every vote. And as far as the ordinary person is concerned, there is no city more politicised than Liverpool.'

Five years ago the Militant-led Labour left would have been justified in claiming to have raised the political temperature in Liverpool.

But nowadays most Liverpool workers have lost their enthusiasm for left-wing politics. One left-wing Labour Party member thought that Jennings was deluding himself: 'It's just not true. Tony is saying that to justify his own position. Or he believes it because he only talks to other activists. But council tenants are not politicised. They just want their repairs done.'

Broad Left protests against rent rises have caught the attention of some council tenants. But outside the council chamber and its environs, most people show no more than a passing interest—if that—in the activities of the left. In the mid-eighties, fighting back against Thatcher was the main topic of conversation in every bar, café and cinema queue in Liverpool. Today, politics mean little or nothing to the former council union activist who's looking for a good redundancy deal, or to the scallies who introduce themselves by asking 'do you want to buy a camera?', or to the veteran unemployed wearing that Harry Dean Stanton look.

The Militant factor

Liverpool, like anywhere else in Britain, has suffered from the demoralising impact of the Thatcher years. But there is an extra dimension to the Liverpool story. This was the city which Militant ran. What made Liverpool unique was that a far-left organisation managed for a time to rally large numbers of working class people behind the call for 'no cuts in jobs and services, no rate or rent increases'.

The discredited right-wing Labour machine was too weak to block the rise of Militant, whose supporters took control of the new Labour administration elected in May 1983. There were some on the Liverpool left who objected to the cliquish methods of Militant. But most shared the same political assumptions and supported similar policies. As a result, Militant supporters, who were the best-organised activists in the city, were able to dominate the political scene.

Leading Militants like deputy council leader Derek Hatton and district Labour Party chair Tony Mulhearn were vehemently opposed to the reactionary policies and corrupt political practices of Labour's old-style councillors, known as 'the Catholic mafia'. But despite their desire to make a break with the rotten traditions of the old Liverpool Labour Party, Militant supporters ended up adopting many of the boss politics methods once associated with the Labour right.

The similarities were far from obvious, especially in the first months of the new administration. In the council chamber and at meetings of the council joint shop stewards' committee, Militant supporters sounded nothing like the reactionary politicians who used to run the council. They refused to accept that working class people should pay the price for government cuts in council spending. They pledged to fight the cuts all the way to a direct confrontation with the government. They talked about organising a mass working class campaign of defiance against the Tories.

The problem was not a lack of fighting spirit: Militant supporters were committed to defending the working class of Liverpool. The problem was that they were also committed to a political strategy which was not up to the task they had set themselves. Militant's strategy was based on the belief that the local state machine could be used to defend the interests of the working class. Once the left gained control of the city council it would be possible to transform the institutions of local government into a force for socialism. The council chamber was seen as the arena in which the struggle against central government cuts would be fought out. The working class would be mobilised to defend the council against attacks from the Tories.

This political orientation was fundamentally flawed. The capitalist state can never be a mechanism for defending the interests of the working class no matter who controls it. It is absurd to imagine that a city council, the local arm of the state machine, can bypass the iron laws of the capitalist system and operate as an independent socialist entity. Indeed, the lesson of history is that even the most radical council cannot even defend jobs and services never mind create an island of socialism if the capitalist state dictates that cuts be made.

A disaster

Militant's orientation towards the council proved disastrous for the people of Liverpool. The consequence of the left's commitment to using local government as a vehicle for socialist change was that it demobilised the only force which could realistically have stopped the cuts and defeated the Tories: the working class. Militant had the chance to build a mass working class movement in the workplaces, on the streets and on the housing estates of Liverpool. It threw that chance away by channelling the fight against the

the liverpool story

government through the council chamber and committee rooms of the city council.

Of course, Militant always insisted that the working class had a role to play. It brought thousands of workers out on to the streets in showpiece demonstrations. But these displays of working class anger were intended as a back-up to the main action which was going on behind closed doors in negotiations between city councillors and senior civil servants from Whitehall. The working class was assigned the role

One minute the council was talking about going over the brink, the next minute it was stitching up deals with Swiss bankers. After a while, nobody outside an inner circle of left wingers could be sure whether the council's budget crisis was really the end of the road or just another cliffhanger which would be resolved with some more creative accounting. One minute the council was committed to no cuts in council jobs, the next minute the same councillors were turning up in taxis to deliver redundancy notices to the workforce.

Many of the instant slums built by earlier Labour administrations had become uninhabitable by the eighties, and the council made a great show of the 2000 dwellings which it claimed to have built. But there was no mention of the fact that the new-build rate was much slower than the number of council properties falling into dereliction; nor of the fact that the new-build budget was maintained by siphoning off funds from other council departments. And where were all the houses? Nobody knew, or if they did, they wouldn't say. Council tenants didn't know how many new houses there were; they had no idea of when they might be offered one; but they did know they couldn't get their bins emptied or repairs done on the brick and concrete bunkers they had to live in.

Heroic but futile

By March 1986, when 47 Labour councillors were surcharged and disqualified for failing to set a legal rate the previous year, Liverpool workers no longer thronged the streets in tens of thousands. They had come away with the impression that left-wing politics were at best an heroic but ultimately futile gesture, and at worst just another scam for wideboys with a liking for good suits.

Yet workers kept on voting Labour. In 1987, after the disqualification of the 49, Labour won 41 out of 59 contested seats. In May 1990, Labour won a further 11 seats, taking its tally to 67 out of 99 seats in the council chamber. This was not a vote of confidence in Labour policy, left or right. Hatred for the Tories is enough to guarantee Labour victories on Merseyside. Yet Liverpool electors don't set much store by council leader Harry Rimmer's strategy of turning the city into a centre for tourism and the arts: £30 a day roading for a John Lennon memorial concert and being sent home for refusing to work in the rain is nobody's idea of secure, well-paid employment.

Even left-wing sympathisers, who look upon the 29 rebels as heirs of the heroic 47, doubt whether Broad Left politics are viable. 'I don't think the left can win', said one working class voter with a Broad Left poster in his window. 'They didn't go too far for me but I think you have to toe the line.' When Liverpool's Labour voters go to the polls, they laugh to themselves ('You think we are being funny but scousers laugh because we have to', said one former union activist) and expect nothing but the private satisfaction of having marked their card against 'that woman who's put the city on its lazzies'.

Meanwhile the Labour left is

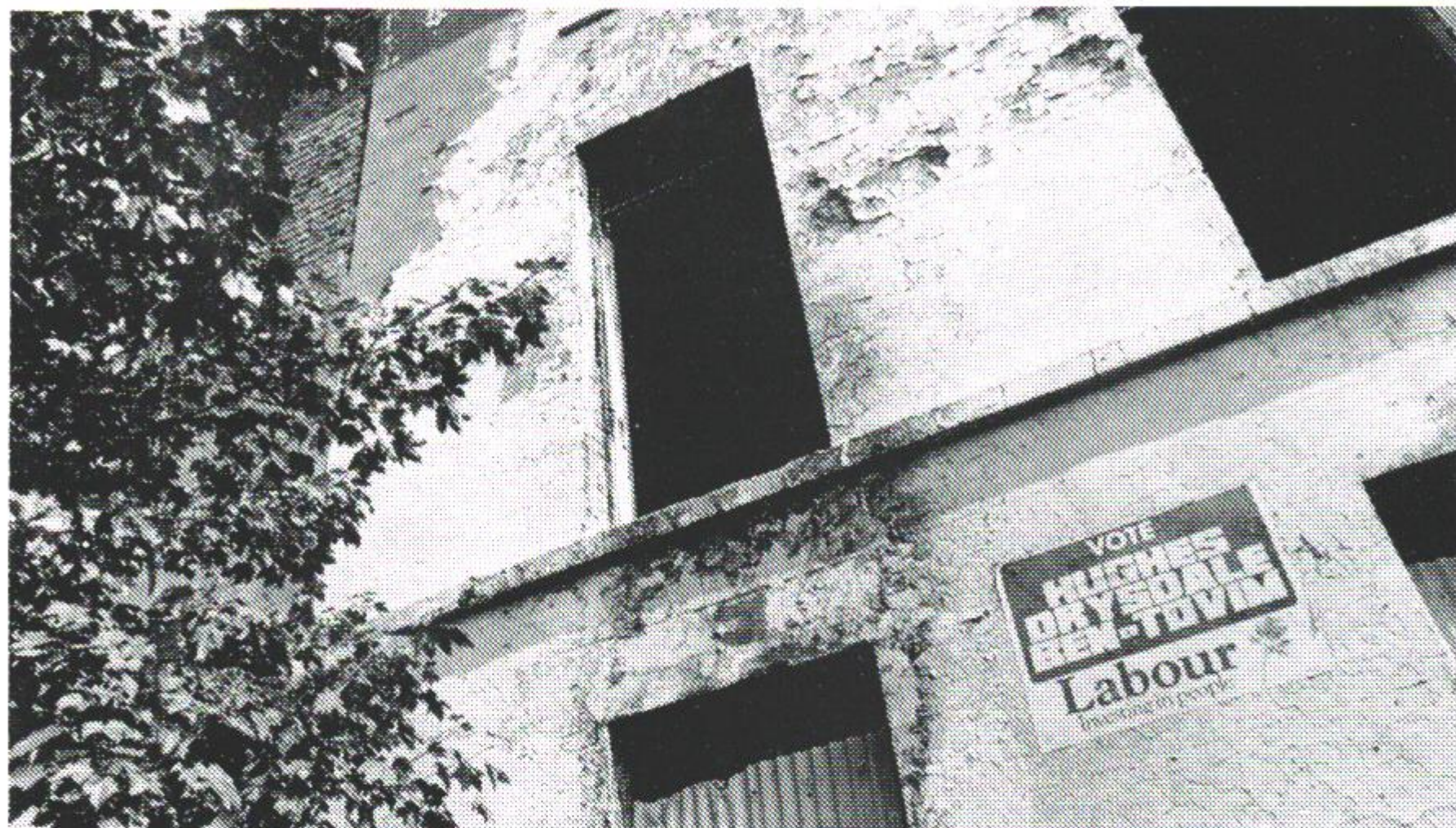


PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

Labour's message won't stick in a city where 70 000 council houses are falling down, 180 000 people live in poverty and 100 000 have only one pair of shoes

of a stage army to be mobilised whenever the council was in a tight corner in its negotiations with the Tories.

Although council workers were seen as the shock troops, they were never in control of events. Their militancy was used as a bargaining counter while deputy council leader Derek Hatton and financial strategist Tony Byrne commuted to meetings with Tory ministers, Labour frontbenchers and national union officials. Strikes and demonstrations were turned on and off according to the dates in Hatton's diary. In the run-up to negotiations, union officials would order council workers to demonstrate their support for the council. If they didn't turn out to order they were told off, or, in the case of the teachers, written off as white-collar renegades. Then they were expected to go back to work and do nothing until the next time their services were required by the council.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that working class support for the socialist council soon gave way to doubts, confusion and cynicism. Town hall workers were forever kept in the dark about what the council was up to: they never knew what was going to happen next because all the decisions were taken by cabals of left councillors meeting behind closed doors.

Was this just a stunt? If so, how long would workers be 'redundant'? Every so often a day of action would be called. Was this the start of the much-discussed general strike? Who had called it: the council workforce, the union officials or the council? Liverpool workers did not know who was saying what, what was going on, who to trust or what to do. The consequence of all this could only be growing demoralisation.

The increasingly cynical atmosphere in Liverpool was exacerbated by Militant's inflated claims about the council's achievements: Militant claimed to have created 1000 new jobs. So why was every council department understaffed? Council literature boasted that the new administration had 'suspended the traditional boss-worker relationship'. But council bosses suspended white-collar workers during a regrading dispute in 1985 and docked teachers' pay when they refused to cover for vacant posts. Between 1983 and 1986, there were more than 50 disputes between Liverpool council workers and their socialist employers. The left-wing council even appointed whiz-kid managers to toughen up on labour discipline.

Militant supporters also claimed 'the kids in Liverpool think Trotsky is a bricklayer because we are Trotskyists and we built the houses'.

withdrawing into its shell. Militant sympathisers are often to be found enjoying each other's company in The Flying Picket, the bar at the trade union centre, decorated with handsomely mounted photographs of strikes and demonstrations. You will be lucky to find any of them selling *Militant* on the city streets the following morning. Even at union branch meetings there is hardly a copy of *Militant* to be seen.

On the rare occasions when the Labour left does raise its profile, it is invariably to make a song and dance about its treatment at the hands of Neil Kinnock. The left's response to the fiasco of its experiment in socialist local government has not been to question its previous political orientation, but to retreat even further into the Labour Party. Instead of addressing the problems confronting the working class in Liverpool, the left is obsessed by interna! party politicking. In a city where, 500 metres from Labour Party headquarters, black youth are up against a militarised police force, the left thinks that the most important issue on the political agenda is 'the struggle against the leadership'. Unfortunately, the left has not learned the lessons of its experience

in the mid-eighties.

The lesson of the Liverpool story is not that fighting back gets you nowhere. It is that fighting a phoney war discredits the class war and demoralises the working class. Militant supporters started out with the belief that they could transform the city council into an instrument for implementing radical socialist policies. They ended up negotiating the terms on which they could administer the local state within the constraints imposed by the system.

But the battle of Liverpool is far from over. The problems facing the city will not go away. The tourism strategy ('it's all image' said one worker in the council's news and promotion unit) is not enough to revive a local economy still reeling from the combined effects of commercial decline, manufacturing shake-out and central government spending cuts.

Liverpool lost 33 per cent of its jobs between 1971 and 1985. In the mid-eighties adult unemployment peaked at 30 per cent and has not yet dropped below 20 per cent. Only 13 per cent of the city's 16 to 19-year olds have jobs. Black youth unemployment may be as high as 90 per cent. A third of the population

left Liverpool between 1961 and 1985. Young and skilled workers are still leaving at the rate of 6000 a year. A third of the remaining population is unemployed, permanently sick or retired. Half of Liverpool's schoolchildren qualify for free school meals. Much of the city's housing stock has reached the end of its useful life.

To balance its books, the council will continue to demand sacrifices from its workforce, its tenants and its poll tax payers. There will be unfilled vacancies in all council departments, and a high unemployment rate throughout the city. There will be a handful of yuppies living in the redeveloped Albert Dock, and thousands of tenants in jerry-built council flats which should have been tinned up and condemned years ago. Liverpool bears all the scars of British decline. Every once in a while there is a chance to change the face of politics by building a new opposition movement. Militant hijacked one such opportunity which rightly belonged to the working class of Liverpool. Once is more than enough.

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'A German racket....You might just as well give
[sovereignty] to Adolf Hitler quite frankly.'
Nicholas Ridley on European monetary union
and the EC

Anti-German images and ideas are at the centre of
British life today. The British press and politicians
don't miss an opportunity to put down the Germans
and dredge up the Second World War. So in
August, when they wanted to persuade British
people that Saddam Hussein is the biggest
bogeyman on Earth, there was only one label to
use: 'the new Hitler'.

The revival of British 'kraut-bashing' parallels the
reunification of Germany and the resurgence of
German power in Europe. But who is afraid of the
new Germany?

The Thatcher government and the British ruling
class certainly have reason to worry. For a century,
Germany has been the major European rival to
Britain. Now, as Germany reunites and spreads its
influence across the Continent, Whitehall is faced
with the German problem again. Today, however,
British capitalism is in a far weaker position to
compete than at any time in the past. As the British
position becomes more desperate, so the
Ridleyesque outbursts against Germany can be
expected to become more hysterical.

Us and them

Within Britain, there is always some popular
support for an anti-German policy; after all, we
were all raised on war films, poppy days and stories
about German tourists pinching the sunbeds. Yet
why should we join people like Ridley and Thatcher
in grinding our teeth about Germany? Our
concerns are quite different from theirs.

Take the question of German reunification. For
the British ruling class, it may be a worrying
development. But for those of us in Britain who
aspire to progressive change, it has some very
positive aspects.

German reunification has been brought about
first and foremost by the collapse of Stalinism in
the East, a system which has discredited Marxism
and whose demise could not come soon enough.

German reunification is shattering the stable
post-war order which was built around the division
of Europe; thus it is unfreezing history, ending the
Stalinist-capitalist pact which has kept the world
safe for exploitation for 45 years.

And German reunification points towards the
potential unity of the mighty German working
class, a class which terrified the kings and

capitalists of Europe in the past and could be an
even stronger force for change in the nineties.

However much it might appear to benefit the
right today, German reunification is an inevitable
feature of a changing world; which means that
those of us who want to change the world should
welcome it. The alternative is to stand alongside
Ridley and the rest of the reactionary anti-German
lobby, defending the divisions and empires of
the past.

Of course we ought to oppose any growth of
German nationalism and expansionism. But not by
siding with the British ruling class as a positive
alternative. Twice already this century, British
capitalists have convinced workers to fight a global
war against German capitalists on their behalf, by
claiming that Britain stood for decency and
democracy against the tyranny of 'the Hun'. Each
time, it began with the sort of verbal 'kraut-bashing'
which is coming back into fashion today.

The enemy is at home

The British establishment is no better than its
German counterpart. Its record of plunder and
slaughter around the world is at least as bloody,
and its ambitions today just as predatory—it simply
lacks the power to fulfil them all. The list of
supposed German characteristics dreamt up at
Margaret Thatcher's secret seminar—'angst,
aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism,
inferiority complex, sentimentality'—sounded to us
like a pretty good description of the British ruling
class. And since these are the people who control
our lives in Britain, they are a far bigger problem
for us than anything which the German
government might do.

To help clarify the real issues facing people in
Britain today, we need to take a stand against the
rising tide of anti-German chauvinism. On the
pages that follow, the articles in our special feature
present a Marxist perspective on some of the
current debates about the British and the Germans.
We invite other contributions to the discussion.

Briti the G





Britain's national identity crisis

Whether they concern 'the German character' or the teaching of history, says Frank Furedi, the big intellectual debates of the moment are really about how Britain should be seen at home and abroad

The Ridley affair, and the subsequent revelations about Margaret Thatcher's confidential meeting at Chequers to discuss German 'national characteristics', are really par for the course. The British establishment seems to suffer from a remarkable fascination with Germany and all things German. In particular, the Second World War has been converted into a permanent

item of news, never out of the papers or off the television screens. By telling and retelling the story of 'the people's war' against Hitler, the relationship between the German and the British 'character' can be rehearsed again and again.

Focusing discussion on the German threat and the experience of the Second World War is all part of a process of self-flattery through comparison; the Germans are depicted as arrogant bullies in order to cast the British in the role of decent chaps. Even serious academics and journalists are drawn into this game. Thus John Casey, a fellow of Caius College, Cambridge, argues that whereas German nationalism is predatory, British patriotism is neutral and inoffensively self-contained:

'British patriotism has always differed from the various *nationalisms* of Europe. It was not expansionist or particularly warlike: it did not define itself against anyone else. By contrast, German nationalism went with the sense that Germany's destiny was to be a world power.' (*Evening Standard*, 24 May 1990)

That Casey can seriously claim a lack of 'expansionist' or 'warlike' nationalism for Britain, the nation which conquered and ruled the largest colonial Empire on Earth, indicates the low level of intellectual objectivity and rigour in this

The British and Germans

the british and the germans

discussion. And what were the participants at the Chequers get-together doing, if not defining themselves against Germany?

Casey's interpretation of Anglo-German relations is widely shared among conservative British intellectuals. Harold James, a former Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and now teaching at Princeton University in the USA, expounds Casey's thesis with eloquence. According to James the Germans, unlike the British, are insecure about their identity:

'Finding identity in the past, however, brought problems for Germans, in spite of the existence of a German language and what might be claimed as a cultural tradition. Politically the past had little to offer.'

By contrast, Britain was 'far more fortunate in having a constitutional and administrative framework in which identity might develop', and therefore 'English nationality found its expression in laws and political bodies' ('Images of others: the roots of German identity', *Encounter*, January 1989). The moral of the story is that Germany, with its unimpressive political past, suffered

from the trauma of an identity crisis, whereas Britain, enjoying the legacy of its national genius, could get on in the world unconcerned by such trivial matters.

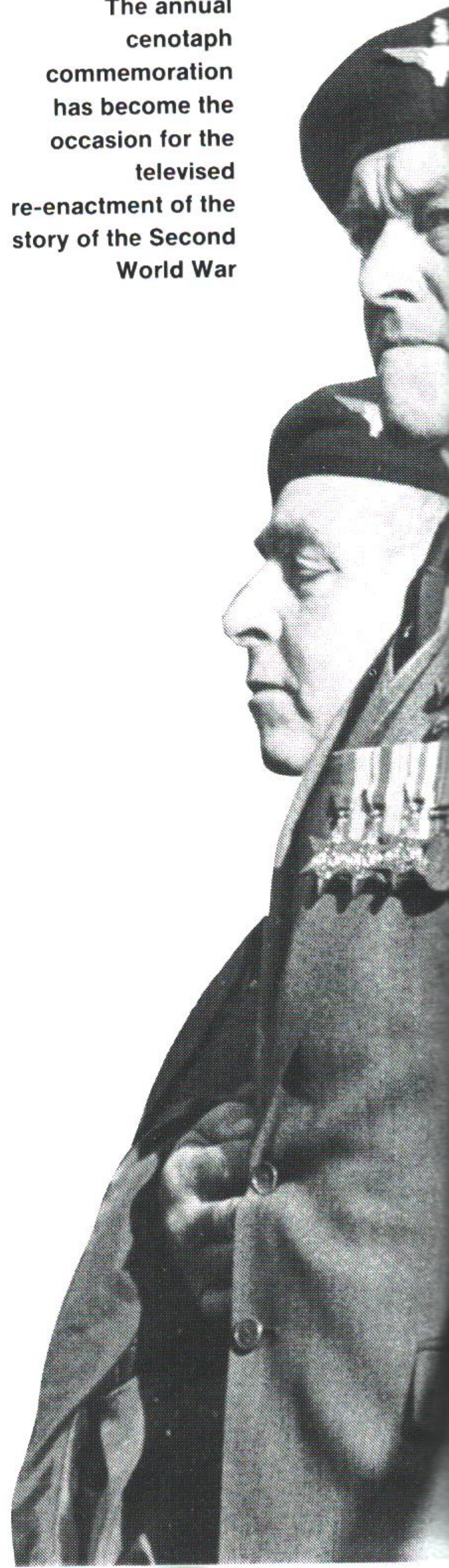
It does not require any special powers of insight to grasp that all of the concern about Germany and its national character in fact expresses a very real anxiety about what constitutes a viable British identity today. This question is the unstated assumption behind all of the commentaries and essays which are now seeking to find a secure place for Britain in a fast-changing world. In parallel with the contemporary fascination with Germany runs a deep sense of uncertainty about Britain's future. Typical of this trend are the self-consciously ambiguous articles that fill the pages of the quality press, like this recent example:

'Historians may look back on this period as the end of the Anglo-Saxon era in international politics. This will inevitably mean a loss of influence but need it be a matter of great disaster? The role to be played on centre stage can be tragic as much as heroic.' (L. Freidman, 'End of the Anglo-Saxon era', *Independent*, 26 July 1990)

They can put a brave face on it, but they cannot hide the underlying sense of despair. The search for a usable British identity is on. The locus for this enterprise is in the past, which explains the source of the British establishment's other modern obsession—*history*.

The public debate about the teaching of history to schoolchildren presents itself at first sight merely as an exchange of views on pedagogical matters. Many of the criticisms of the existing curriculum are probably valid. However, the attempt to project as an alternative an 'unbiased' history of facts and chronology represents an evasion of intent.

**The annual
cenotaph
commemoration
has become the
occasion for the
televised
re-enactment of the
story of the Second
World War**



Take the pamphlet published by the right-wing Centre for Policy Studies, 'History in peril'. In this pamphlet, Alan Beattie argues that history ought to be about 'the reconstruction of the past for its own sake', instead of interpretation. Beattie explicitly criticises the attempt to 'draw lessons from history' and suggests that history exists on its own account which ought to be the object of study. This rather technical way of treating history does not match with the politically loaded implication of the title of the pamphlet. Clearly the message of the title, 'History in peril' is far more than 'Chronology in peril' or 'The facts in peril'. That is because, as Beattie himself understands, history is never studied for its own sake. History is not a series of events which happened in the past, but is about making sense of the present. For the British establishment, history represents a resource which can be exploited to help cohere a sense of national identity today.

The recent outpouring of concern about history has not been prompted by any appalling level of teaching, but by the profound insecurity of the British ruling class. An elite that is confident about itself and its future has no need continually to advertise its glories of the past and create a

culture of heritage and nostalgia. The very attempt to recreate a new school of history implies an orientation towards the construction of a modern state religion.

Donald Cameron Watt, a professor of international history at the University of London, claims that he and his colleagues are the 'custodians of the national memory'. Watt is certainly not interested in the 'reconstruction of the past for its own sake'. He observes that it 'comes back to the notion that the history of our state and the people who live in it, of our ancestors and their ideas and their society, is an essential part of how we see ourselves today. How do we know where we are going if we do not know from where we are coming?' (*Evening Standard*, 22 March 1990).

Rewriting history

What is at issue in the discussion of British history has shifted from a neutral concern with the past to 'how we see ourselves today'. As the high Tory Ronald Butt has stated, a 'nation needs its history, without which its steps into the future will be hesitant and decadent, not to say barbaric' (*Times*, 25 June 1990). The 'history' which a nation needs is not just a simple chronology of events, however. The history which Britain needs, it appears, is one which extols its greatness and promotes its unique contribution to the development of human civilisation. It is important to underline this point. The arguments for a new history curriculum are

really a call for history to be rewritten in line with the contemporary needs of the British establishment.

The need to rewrite history so as to endow Britain with a mission and purpose is not a particularly new problem. Back at the turn of the century, Britain was already experiencing the first awareness of its imperial decline. The growing appreciation of the threat of an ascendant German capitalism and of a dynamic USA stimulated the British establishment to rethink its role in the world; as it lost ground to its rivals in economic matters, so it strove to win itself a firm position at least on the moral high ground. The Cambridge historian Sir John Seely provided an approach which helped secure for the British elite an access to moral authority:

'It is a favourite maxim of mine that history...should not merely gratify the reader's curiosity about the past, but modify his view of the present and his forecast of the future. Now if this maxim be sound, the history of England ought to end with



the british and the germans

something that might be called a moral.' (Quoted in D Wornell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History*, Cambridge University Press, 1987)

The moral which the establishment selected was that of Britain's unique civilising mission around the globe, as the carrier of what Rudyard Kipling called 'the white man's burden'. This theme provided an adequate stimulus for recasting a new national identity, at least for a time.

Moral drift

However, by the 1930s there were unmistakable signs that the British ruling class had lost its sense of purpose and direction. The image of Britain helplessly drifting along captures the intellectual crisis of the time. Compromised further through appeasing Hitler's Germany, the establishment was losing its remaining moral authority. Mounting criticism of Britain's imperial role called into question its claims to a special mission. Britain's humiliating defeat by the Japanese in Singapore in 1942 exposed imperialist realities all too clearly: the popular support that the Japanese enjoyed among the Malays showed that the British way of life was a long way from commanding the loyalty and affection of its subjects.

Ironically, the British authorities were finally able to cultivate their new national identity in relation to the war against Nazi Germany. When compared to Hitler's Germany, Britain looked positively democratic and benign. The image of a lone bastion of freedom fighting totalitarian tyranny helped construct a sense of national identity through the bitter experience of the Second World War. This was a new British identity, which sought to substitute for the grandeur of empire the image of a land of freedom, moral values and unique political institutions animated by the spirit of social reform.

A new Britain

Ernest Bevin, foreign secretary in the post-war Labour government, emphasised the theme of Britain as the natural habitat of the spirit of liberty and reform. Indeed, the more Britain's economic power declined, the greater became the emphasis on its spiritual qualities. Bevin outlined a scenario in which Britain's moral qualities alone would be sufficient to secure a leading role in future world affairs:

'Material aid will have to come principally from the US but the countries of Western Europe which despise the spiritual values of

America will look to us for political and moral guidance and for assistance in building up a counter attraction to the baleful tenets of communism.' ('Memorandum by the secretary of state for foreign affairs', *CAB 129/33*, 4 January 1948)

During and after the Second World War, the foreign office followed up this orientation and specialised in producing propaganda which portrayed Britain as the nation of democracy, reform and the welfare state. These qualities were continually emphasised by comparison with the dictatorial and fascist regimes which Britain fought against in the war.

Sections of the British establishment always felt uneasy about having to trade in the old, grand identity for a social democratic one. Boasts about having the best health service in the world could never carry the conviction of the old imperial propaganda. Spiritual qualities could not replace material power and a sense of irreversible decline influenced the mood of the establishment, a sentiment that pervades the atmosphere in novels from Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* to John le Carré's spy thrillers.

This is the sense of resignation which the Thatcherite crusade labels as defeatist. The Thatcher government is reacting to the hand-me-down national identity of social reform, seeking to recreate the more assertive Britishness of the past. By challenging the post-war consensus, however, it has also helped to reinforce the crisis of British identity. Thatcher has called into question the welfare state and other institutions of the post-war period; she has thus helped to erode the image which the modern British establishment liked to have of itself, as Jonathan Clark has noted in the *Times*:

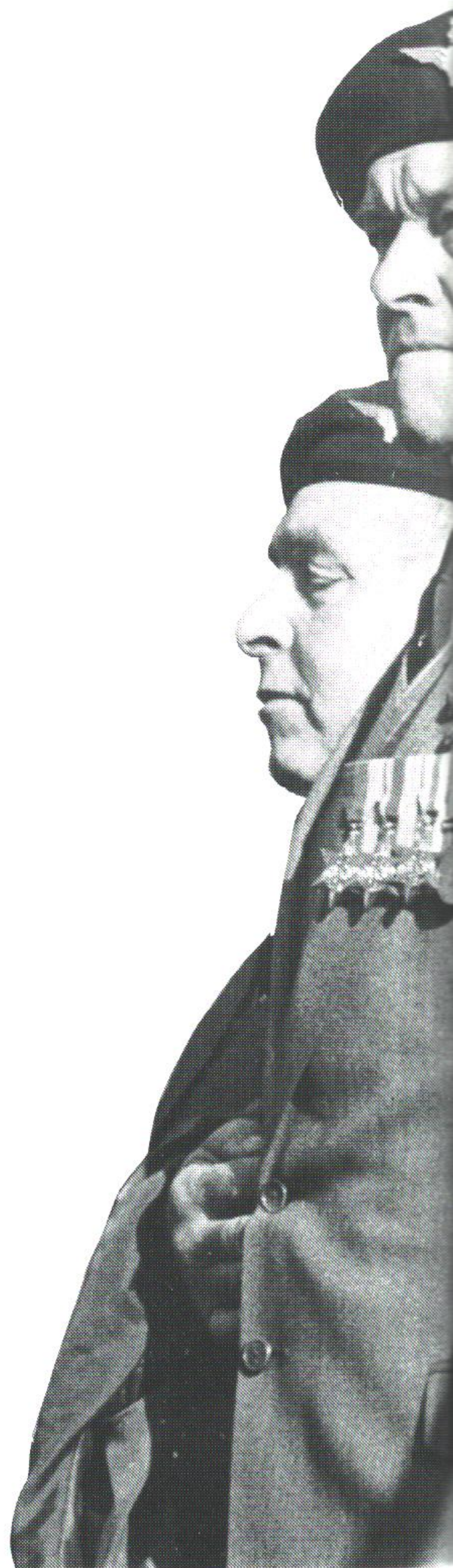
'Empire, Protestantism and parliamentary democracy all acted as symbols of identity: each of them in turn crumbled. Now the last symbol, Britain as the first and best social democratic welfare state, has gone too.' (12 April 1990)

More to the point, uncertainties about Britain's international position, fears about the special relationship with America, concern about its role in Europe and the reunification of Germany force the problem of identity on to the political agenda. Germany, which used to provide Britain with such a comfortable counterpoint through which to advertise its charms, now exposes Britain's claim to be a world leader as just a public relations exercise. Yet

the British establishment cannot allow its identity to be undermined without trying to construct a replacement; as Sir John Seeley once reminded his class, what is required is history with a moral. So what is it to be?

Finding a new identity for a nation is no simple matter. New definitions are not simply about cohering the British people, they are also about dividing, about setting them apart from the rest. There is no point in the authorities developing a new national identity if it merely equates Britain with other mundane nations. That is why the campaign to change the history curriculum is also explicitly hostile to multicultural education. Right-wing ideologues argue that, since multicultural education treats

The very fact that the British ruling class needs publicly to demand a new history is symptomatic of its lack of self-respect



cultures as having comparable weight, it undermines the unique—and by implication, superior—role of British traditions.

According to Ronald Butt, history has been 'derailed by a cultural coup d'état' as poor English children are forced into 'an emotional canter around the world for glimpses of the history of far distant people' (*Times*, 26 June 1990). Others attack a supposed multicultural project which seeks to create a national identity by destroying the British way of life.

The campaign against multicultural education represents an attempt to mould a British national identity through putting the emphasis on the racial element. In this vein, David Lovibond bemoans the destruction of the English identity through post-war immigration. 'A generation ago', says Lovibond, 'these islands were occupied by a single people who despite differences of region, background and expectation were bound by common loyalties and affection, by a shared history and memory'. Then the fall from paradise: 'Thirty years on and the English have become "the white section of the community" and Britishness is something to be had from the bazaar.' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 13 August 1989)

Lovibond's nostalgic recreation of 'these islands' occupied by a 'single people' who also happen to be English rather delicately disposes of

the Irish question and the perceptions of those other non-peoples of Scotland and Wales. The 'single people' is all in the imagination—but then, that's what the creation of a national identity is all about.

What is particularly insidious about Lovibond's style is the attempt to turn the world upside down, so that Britain the colonial power becomes a location for beleaguered white communities whose national birthright has become a commodity for sale. The poor English are now victimised in their own land.

Fortunately Lovibond, inspired by the deeds of the knights of King Arthur's round table, is ready to take on 'a triumphalist black nationalism which reviles and despises England', and which 'demands that every trace and nuance of Englishness be condemned as racist'.

Even some right-wing thinkers find Lovibond's attempt to rebuild a British identity on racial myths somewhat disturbing. One contributor to the right-wing weekly, the *Spectator*, has warned that 'chauvinism, long considered beyond the pale in polite circles, is becoming respectable again' (I Buruma, 'England, whose England?', 9 September 1989). Obviously a political culture based on unabashed bigotry is unlikely to strengthen Britain's international prestige. But at the same time, this hesitation over the unpleasant consequences of rewriting history is an attempt to avoid facing up to reality. Those reforging a national identity will have to make chauvinism respectable.

The very fact that the British ruling class needs publicly to demand a new history is symptomatic of its lack of self-respect. The attacks on multicultural education reflect a defensive presentiment that British prestige can only be adequately portrayed if other cultures are discounted. That Britain needs to be continually reminded of the Dunkirk spirit and the Battle of Britain is again a clear sign of its present weakness. The more that history is in the news, the more the British establishment is forced to concede the here and now to others on the world stage.

Unfortunately for the British ruling class, its own crisis of identity coincides with the arrival of a united Germany. Twenty or 30 years ago, Ridley's views would have caused no problems for any British government. Today the decline in British influence means that there are less options available for impatient ministers—at least in public. It is unclear what renewed national identities the public relation experts are about to manufacture. But while we wait, expect a lot more Second World War material and attempts to recreate the politics of race with a capital R.



the british and the germans

No doubt many British politicians agree with Nicholas Ridley that the European Community is 'a German racket', that the French are simply 'Germany's poodles', and that West German chancellor Helmut Kohl is comparable to Adolf Hitler. But such views are normally expressed only in private. The fact that Ridley's outburst found its way into the pages of the *Spectator* is symptomatic of the way in which the debate about Britain's relations with Germany and Europe is now publicly dividing the Tory Party.

From the Westland affair through the Rowntree Mackintosh takeover to the row about membership of the European Monetary System, the issue of Europe has been at the centre of most of the major rifts within Tory ranks during the Thatcher years. Ridley is but the latest cabinet minister to meet his downfall over Europe: one way or another, the same issue drove Michael Heseltine, Leon Brittan and Nigel Lawson out of the government, and led to Geoffrey Howe's demotion. As rows over Europe look set to intensify within the British establishment, Ridley's is unlikely to be the last scalp taken.

On the surface the European debate seems to make little sense. Why debate Britain's relationship to Europe when everybody accepts that Britain has become increasingly European for the last three decades? Since the mid-sixties Britain has traded more with Europe than the rest of the world put together. In the seventies Britain became a full member of the European Community. In the eighties Britain signed the Single European Act setting in motion the 1992 project. In the nineties the Channel Tunnel may yet make it easier for Londoners to travel to Paris than to Glasgow.

After the Cold War

The current debate has little to do with the old discussion about whether or not Britain should be in Europe. Leaving the EC is no longer considered seriously even by the biggest 'Little Englanders'. Instead, the current debate about Germany and Europe centres on how Britain will manage its international relations and national identity in the changing post-Cold War world.

Through the twentieth century, Britain has been on a downward path from its old position as the top capitalist nation to its current status as a third rate power. Now a new era of international relations threatens to deprive the British authorities of any

A Great Britain or a Good European?

Helen Simons looks at both sides of the great Tory debate about Britain's relationship with the new German-centric Europe

global influence. The crisis of foreign policy today centres on whether Britain can find an independent niche for itself in the revised world order, or whether it will have to accept a subordinate position within a German-dominated Europe.

In the past the British ruling class has proved adept at maintaining the political trappings of a global power long after British capitalism ceased to carry much serious economic weight. This strategy is best exemplified by the policy put forward by Winston Churchill straight after the Second World War.

Although only leader of the opposition at the time, Churchill's strategy influenced both Labour and Conservative thinking in the post-war years. His case was that, while Britain could no longer claim to be a global power on a par with the USA and Soviet Union, it could still exercise influence in three spheres.

First and foremost British self-importance could be bolstered by playing up the 'special relationship'

with the new world superpower, the USA. The special relationship allowed the British to maintain a limited global presence by playing head prefect to the overstretched Americans. Britain proved a useful sidekick as the USA set out to reshape the world in its own image.

Churchill's second sphere was the Commonwealth. Britain had lost much of the Empire. But as the head of the Commonwealth Britain could still speak with a louder voice in international affairs than could other comparable European states.

The European sphere was last on Churchill's list. He argued that Britain could not afford to get too embroiled in European affairs at the expense of its other global interests. At the time Britain's lack of influence within an untested Europe seemed a small price to pay for retaining a wider international status.

The three spheres strategy proved a useful way of managing Britain's post-war decline. The treasured special relationship kept British feet

Nicholas Ridley's anti-German outburst showed how the divisions in the Tory Party over Europe can no longer be contained in the privacy of the cabinet

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk



under the top table. Britain received a slice of the action within each of the post-war multilateral agencies, in return for acting as America's poodle. In the United Nations, the UK was one of only five nations granted the power of veto; Britain was placed second in the voting structure of the International Monetary Fund; while the Cold War and Nato guaranteed Britain a military presence in Continental Europe.

The British could exercise little real power in global politics; in the Suez crisis of 1956, when Britain and France tried to invade Egypt without US support, Washington humiliated them. Yet the trappings of international power were vital to

maintaining the authority of the British ruling class. The fact that the Union Jack still flew high above the centres of world power added powerful legitimacy to an otherwise exhausted British establishment.

The post-war order froze international relations, and Britain's international standing, for more than 40 years. It allowed Whitehall to cling to delusions of political grandeur entirely unrelated to the true state of Britain's weakening economy. Now, as the end of the Cold War ushers in a new era of world politics, the British lion risks being exposed as a charlatan.

The carefully laid foundations of Britain's national identity, as a

leading force for democracy and civilisation around the world, are threatened in the 1990s. Today the British establishment is in turmoil at the prospect of facing up to its own insignificance. It is suffering a crisis of confidence about its place in the world, and about the corporate image of British capitalism. This is the background to the fractures over Europe.

In the past there has been consensus within the British establishment about the direction of foreign policy. Today there is no such consensus because, whichever way the British authorities turn, they find themselves in a no-win situation. The question of Europe sums up this dilemma. Should British capitalists end the pretence of playing any independent global role and throw in their lot with a German-dominated Europe? Or can they still struggle to carve out some new international role for themselves?

No-win situation

Either way, the British establishment has a lot to lose. Within Europe Britain will play a secondary role to Germany and even France. But if Britain remains outside the European arena it risks being isolated and ignored. There are compelling arguments against each option and little merit in either. Thus the squabbles within Tory ranks continue unresolved.

In recent years the pro-European forces within the Tory Party have been strengthened to the point where this is now the majority view among cabinet members. The Ridley affair prompted a line of Tory ministers to express their confidence in the European future, in order to limit the damaging fall-out.

However, the pro-European faction does not have an emotional or principled commitment to going Continental. No doubt most of the 'pro-Europeans' share Ridley's fears of a powerful Germany, are equally contemptuous of French 'poodles' and loathe what they consider to be the German national character. Despite this, they put forward a more positive vision of Europe for purely pragmatic reasons. They fear that if Britain appears to be too anti-European it risks being marginalised.

The current debate about whether or when Britain should join the European Exchange Rate Mechanism has brought out the nub of the argument. The pro-Europeans may agree that the ERM is essentially a 'German racket' backed by the Bundesbank. Their point is that, rather than simply waiting to be a victim of such a 'racket', Britain should join the gang and seek to influence the German 'godfather'.

the british and the germans

Either way, Germany and the deutschmark will dominate the Continent. The pro-Europeans just want British capitalism to make the best of a bad job. They point to the recent surge in the pound's exchange rate, after rumours that Britain would soon be joining the ERM, as evidence of the benefits to be gained from a closer, if subordinate, relationship with the mighty German economy.

Out in the cold

One of the reasons why the debate has become so heated over the past few months is that the pro-Europeans sense that Britain is already in danger of being left out in the cold. The relatively relaxed reaction to Ridley's remarks from the Germans and others demonstrated how easily British political opinion can already be marginalised within Europe. The pro-Europeans believe that the need to take their preferred option has become more urgent in the light of recent developments.

The most compelling argument for a more constructive attitude towards Europe is the rapid disappearance of all other international arenas for British diplomacy. Washington is now far more interested in a special relationship with the emerging German giant than with fading Britain. Even the crisis-stricken Soviet Union can see little advantage in courting the British. Gorbachev is concentrating on doing business with the USA and West Germany. Meanwhile, Britain has suffered other setbacks such as being relegated from second to joint fourth place in the International Monetary Fund's pecking order. In such a climate Britain could be left without even a flat-footed dancing partner at the international politics party. A place within a German-led Europe looks increasingly inviting by comparison.

A second compelling argument for taking the Euro-option today is that, at the same time that Britain is losing all other options, Europe is re-emerging as the centre of international affairs. West Germany was a dynamic leader in the world economy throughout the eighties. With the approach of reunification, however, Germany is acquiring the political clout to match its economic power. Many supporters of European integration now see it as a way of hitching a ride on Germany's coat-tails.

This is best expressed in the 1992 project, through which weaker European states hope to link their own uncertain fortunes to Germany's destiny. The fact that reunification could turn German eyes and investments to Eastern rather than Western Europe has prompted

nations such as France to press for faster integration. Unless Britain becomes a full member of the new Europe, the pro-Europeans fear that it could be excluded from this drive to form a powerful regional bloc.

The third significant argument for Europe is the changing pattern of British business. British businessmen have had to go for 1992 and the European market to survive. For all the anti-German chauvinism within the British establishment, West Germany is now the major trading partner of the United Kingdom. Britain now runs a trade deficit with every EC country except Ireland. At the same time Britain's commercial interests with the rest of the globe are becoming less viable. In the sixties 30 per cent of Europe's trade with the rest of the world came from the UK. By the eighties Britain accounted for less than half that amount.

Arguments for Europe

The Europeanisation of British business over the past decade has encouraged a more pro-European outlook among the middle classes. Whereas in the past a tub-thumping anti-European speech was sure to boost the standing of politicians within Britain, today there is a more equivocal response to such public expressions of chauvinism. Whatever they might think of Europeans, British businessmen with nowhere else to turn fear the consequences of an anti-British backlash on the Continent.

There is also a growing fear of missing the European boat within the City of London. The City is really the last British success story, responsible for more than 10 per cent of gross national product. Anything which puts the City at risk threatens the remaining viability of the entire British economy.

London's continuing success as a financial centre rests on its status as the European outpost of the 24-hour global financial markets. London has managed to dominate the European financial sector because its markets are traditionally the least regulated. In a decade of mergers and acquisition, junk bonds, futures and options markets and massive currency speculation, tightly regulated markets hinder the financial players' room to manoeuvre. By contrast the City of London gives speculators plenty of scope. London has therefore remained at the centre of Europe's financial trading. It has been estimated that about 30 per cent of the turnover of West German government bonds, half of the turnover in international DM straight issues, 80-90 per cent of DM floating rate notes and 20 per cent of turnover

in German equity takes place in London (Royal Bank of Scotland review, March 1990).

Many fear that the new Single European Market will challenge London's supremacy. Under the 1992 directives the rules and regulations that fetter the European markets are set to be swept aside. Once Frankfurt can operate with the same freedom as the London markets the British lead will be challenged. So London's financial houses and banks are keen to consolidate a European stronghold today (for example, through European mergers and acquisitions), in order to compete within the new deregulated Europe tomorrow.

From the point of view of British capitalism, the arguments for Europe appear compelling. But influential sections of the British establishment, as personified by Ridley and by Thatcher herself, can also see some powerful logic in the arguments against.

Just as the pro-European Tories cannot be considered to have a heartfelt commitment to the European dream, so the anti-Europeans are not profoundly anti-Europe. Everybody agrees that Britain is now a European economy and nobody seriously suggests pulling out. Instead, the anti-Europe lobbyists argue that Britain should retain its distinct national status and identity within the EC. They attack full European integration as an infringement of British sovereignty, and reject the idea that Britain should abandon its pretensions to play a global role and become just another good European like Italy or Belgium.

Some of these arguments are more rhetorical than real. In many economic matters the British have little national sovereignty anyway, because the economy is now so reliant on factors beyond government control, such as movements in the world financial markets. The independence and importance of the pound have been exaggerated in the ERM debate. Sterling is an international currency of rapidly declining importance. Today world financiers hold pounds not as a sign of confidence in the British economy, but simply because of high short-term interest rates here.

On the other hand, and contrary to the wilder scaremongering of the anti-Europeans, Britain is not about to become an anonymous zone of a European super-state. Germany is certainly set to dominate European affairs, and the deutschmark will rule the money markets. But as far as formal steps to 'merge' European states are concerned, even the more modest proposals for currency union are not a realistic prospect in the foreseeable future.

The relaxed reaction to Ridley's remarks from the Germans demonstrated how easily British political opinion can already be marginalised within Europe

However, the anti-European argument does raise some very important problems for the British establishment. The prospect of abandoning all pretensions to be a major player on the world stage, and accepting a subordinate position within Europe, fills the ruling class with dread. It potentially represents an historic crisis for British capitalism, since it strikes at the heart of the images of Empire and international leadership on which the British establishment has constructed its authority through the twentieth century.

The ruling class takes every opportunity to broadcast the supposed superiority of the British system and the British way of life, and to insist upon the defence of British sovereignty. It has justified its rule as the pursuit of a unique national destiny. To now concede that Britain has been economically and politically defeated by Germany, and to accept publicly a subordinate position in the world, would risk precipitating a serious crisis of confidence within the establishment. It is in this context that the anti-European lobby is seeking to find a more independent role for Britain outside of simply being another European nation.

As the old world order fractures, Britain is unlikely to be the only loser. By expressing the most forthright anti-German line in international politics it is at least possible that Britain could act as a focus for others who are likely to be disgruntled by the expansion of German imperialism. This is the role for which Ridley seems to have been making a pitch in his *Spectator* interview. His anti-German outburst could be dismissed as the rambling of a tired and emotional bad loser. In another light, however, it could also be seen as a new departure in international diplomacy. By using such blunt language Ridley at least tested the water for the anti-Europeans and staked a claim for Britain's possible role in the future as leader of the loser's club.

In some respects Thatcher's anti-European instincts make sense for the British establishment. But the Ridley affair demonstrates that this is not a game for only one player. Britain can only attempt to lead an anti-German backlash if others are willing to be openly anti-German. Today however everyone wants to be Germany's friend. In these circumstances, the British economy's dependence on Europe exercises a strong pull, and the eventual

resolution of the debate in favour of the pro-Europeans may seem inevitable; note how even Thatcher's anti-German seminar at Chequers concluded with the advice to 'be nice' to the Germans.

However, the British ruling class is not ready to accept its eclipse as inevitable and to go quietly into a German-dominated Europe. It will seek to keep all options open, digging its heels in even as it is pulled along the European road, and fighting tooth and nail over the terms of any final surrender.

The unresolved character of the debate on Germany and Europe is set to continue for the foreseeable future, with uncertainty and outbursts on all sides and further splits among the Tories. Britain's tightrope-walking act was summed up by a recent survey published in the *Economist*, which found that the United Kingdom scored the highest marks on implementing EC directives (making it the most pro-European of all EC states), but scored bottom marks on all questions of attitude (making it the most anti-European power). This schizophrenia seems likely to shape British politics for some time to come.

FROM BUCHAREST

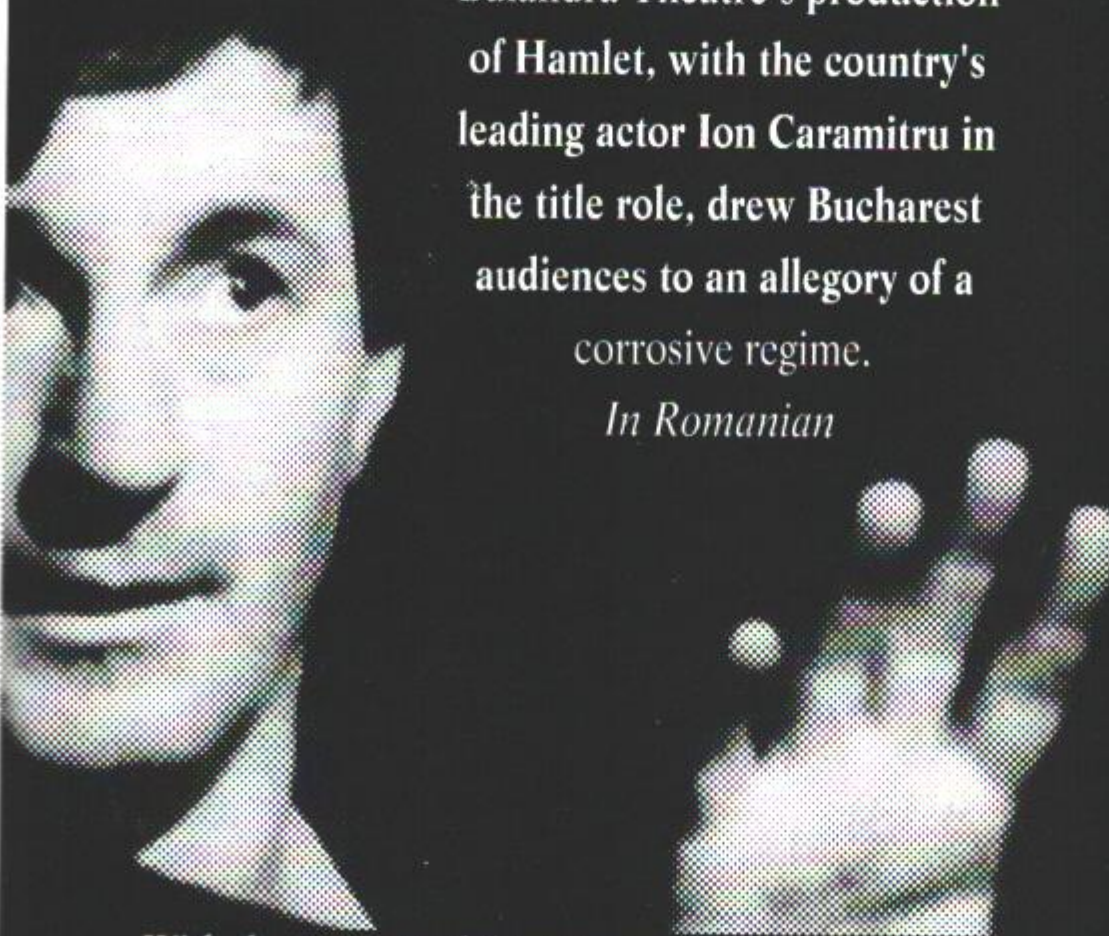
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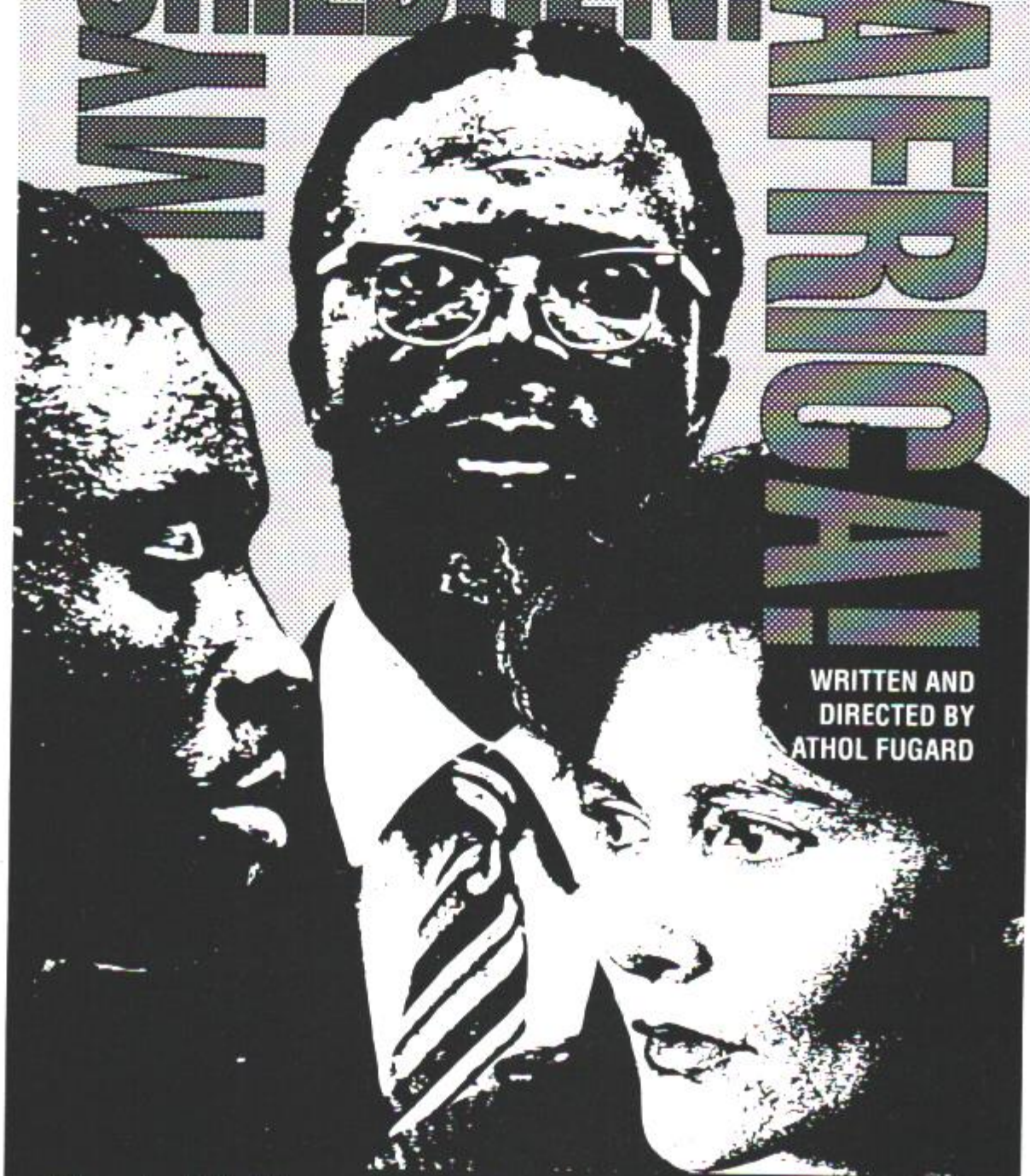
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the british and the germans

A lot of nonsense is being talked by political commentators about German reunification. First, there is a tendency to exaggerate the economic problems confronting West Germany. The task of reunification is often presented as an awesome burden which could damage the West German economy. In reality, West German capitalists are more likely to look upon the economic and political merger as a tremendous investment opportunity. Although they are now more aware of the difficulties involved, they are still determined to exploit the openings provided by a new market in the East.

Second, Western commentators are talking up the likelihood of a backlash against the introduction of the market by workers facing mass unemployment, high prices and low wages. There has been much speculation about the possibility of a 'hot autumn': a groundswell of discontent spreading across the country as workers refuse to pay the price for the return of the market. In fact, East German workers are likely to blame their problems on the old system rather than on the capitalist market. No matter how bad things get in the short term, workers will put up with a lot; they are so desperate to get away from the past that they will not risk doing anything that might jeopardise the future. So while there may well be strikes, there will be no explosion of unrest in East Germany this autumn.

Economic and monetary union is already a *fait accompli* as of 1 July 1990: what is now underway is a process of recapitalisation in East Germany. The accelerated moves towards political union are intended to minimise the disruptive consequences of the transition to an integrated market economy. Although West Germany's ruling Christian Democrats failed to bring forward the date of the all-German elections, political union is accelerating.

West Germany's economic strength gives it the power to carry through the recapitalisation of East Germany. The West German economy is growing at four per cent a year and despite an influx of migrant workers from over the border unemployment is at its lowest level since 1982. West Germany has built up investment in key sectors of manufacturing as a result of its export capacity. Some

75 per cent of its exports go to Europe: of these more than 80 per cent are capital goods. Investment in production is increasing at an annual rate of 10 per cent, half of which is expansion of productive capacity.

West Germany has obvious political and cultural advantages in moving Eastwards. And it has an added advantage in that key sectors of the neighbouring economy can easily be merged with their counterparts in the West—once the East has had a taste of capitalist rationalisation, that is. A major shake-out of industry has already begun. According to various estimates, productivity in East German industry is 30 to 50 per cent that of West Germany. As a result, up to 60 per cent of East German industry will go to the wall. Those sectors which can be incorporated into the West German network, such as machine tools, will be rationalised. Other industries, such as the massively polluted chemicals sector, will probably be scrapped.

West German capitalists are particularly interested in those industries with export links into the Eastern bloc. East Germany has played a similar role in Eastern Europe to that played by West Germany in Western Europe. A third of everything it produces is exported, mostly to the Eastern bloc. For Bonn, East Germany is the stepping stone to the East, a way of leapfrogging competition from other capitalist powers.

Joint ventures galore

Some two thirds of all East Germany's exports are in the transport and mechanical engineering sectors and these sectors have received most attention from West German firms. All the major car producers in the GDR are now involved in joint ventures with Western companies. For example, in the mechanical engineering sector, Knorr Bremse AG of West Germany has signed a joint venture with BBW of East Germany for the production of brakes for railway vehicles, giving the former monopoly control in East Germany.

Prior to monetary union, the main concern of the financial authorities was the threat of inflation due to a rapid growth of the money supply. In fact, only half the deutschmarks allocated to the East German economy had been taken into circulation by August. The high price of goods in East Germany is rapidly soaking up savings. In July, food prices in most shops were 50 and even 100 per cent above those in West Germany. Nevertheless, people were paying these high prices—not

Thomas Fischer and John Gibson take issue with some of the myths being spun about German reunification



only because the produce was better quality, but also because the removal of state subsidies means that East German food is often even more expensive. Given that average wages are less than half those in West Germany, savings will soon be used up.

West German capital has been slow to step into the breach, partly because of infrastructural problems in the East. Anything between DM500 billion and DM1000 billion will have to be spent to bring the infrastructure up to acceptable standards in a state where just 25 per cent of railway track is electrified.

A new Germany in the making

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk



East German workers looking to West German chancellor Helmut Kohl to lead them out of the past are not going to jeopardise their future by organising an autumn of discontent

West German firms have already set to work repairing and improving the roads. But road and rail improvements alone will cost an estimated DM200 billion.

Apart from these infrastructural constraints, other problems have hampered the deregulation of the East German economy. Confusion over ownership rights deterred potential investors fearful that somebody could stake a claim to a factory because it was taken from them in 1949. The lack of basic information about economic performance has also been a disincentive. The Treuhandanstalt,

the trusteeship overseeing the privatisation of East German factories, had to send out a questionnaire to the 8000 companies under its control to find out basic information about their stocks, debts, credit, etc. Another problem is the continuing migration of skilled workers into West Germany. In addition, 50 000 workers are commuting there to work: this figure is likely to grow to 250 000 by the end of the year.

The upshot of all this is that market forces have been slow to assert themselves. Given the collapse of the old system, this is leading to a

contraction of the economy affecting even the most dynamic sectors. As a result, the extension of credits has not had the effect of rationalising industry. They were extended in a blanket fashion and have been used in many cases to cover wage bills rather than restructure production.

In response to these problems, Bonn wants to step in and take more direct control over the deregulation shambles. It is pursuing a more differential credit policy, identifying which firms are worth saving, giving them credits and fixing them up with a partner in the West. The rest will be allowed to go to the wall. The West is also replacing the East German Treuhandanstalt with an all-German ministry for reconstruction (Aufbauministerium), and has taken steps to resolve the row over property rights.

Pros and cons

It is not surprising that Bundesbank chief Karl Otto Pöhl thinks that the DM115 billion credits being offered by West Germany are insufficient. The West German state will have to pick up the tab for the extra resources necessary for infrastructural repair, etc. However, despite the grave problems this poses for Bonn, this process is not going to bankrupt the West German economy. Instead, it should be seen as sensible regional investment from the West's point of view, to create new outlets for profitable enterprise. Whatever the immediate difficulties of recapitalisation and restructuring in the East, they are easily outweighed by the long-term advantages for West German capitalism.

The Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats have their differences over the timing and scale of state assistance to the East. But they entirely agree on the need to keep down the wages of East German workers. Until monetary union, average wage levels were about 31 per cent of those in West Germany. Bonn's economics minister Helmut Haussmann argued that workers in East Germany should have no pay rises and no reduction in working hours for at least five years. This was obviously just a bargaining position. While metalworkers were on strike in July, the West German union IG Metall accepted the government's 35 per cent pay rise to East German chemical workers. This has become the going rate for all workers. But 35 per cent of not very much is a good deal for the state and a bad deal for workers. It still leaves average wages well below half those in the West. Also, in a bid to stem the flow of skilled workers Westwards, Bonn wants to encourage the introduction of more differential

the british and the germans

pay rates in the East, creating a two-tier workforce.

Although attention has focused on difficulties in the economic sphere, there are tricky political problems confronting the capitalist class too. The proposal to bring forward the date of the all-German elections was inspired not simply by narrow electoral calculations as the media insisted. It was primarily a response to the collapse of political authority in Berlin.

The coalition government of Lothar de Maizière has no legitimacy among East Germans because it is so obviously a lame-duck administration. Every worker, farmer, student or intellectual in the East looks to Bonn rather than Berlin to see what is going to happen. De Maizière's diminutive stature is symbolic of his political relationship with the towering Helmut Kohl.

Unfilled vacuum

The collapse of the old Stalinist regime in East Germany left a political vacuum which has yet to be filled. Despite the rapid transfer of political power from Erich Honecker to Egon Krenz to Hans Modrow to Lothar de Maizière, very few East Germans have any respect for the institutions of the state. This poses grave problems for the capitalists in West Germany: how can they hope to reorganise and run the East efficiently unless the institutions of state power there are accepted as legitimate authorities?

The West German government cannot simply sweep away and replace the existing state administration in East Germany. Much of the old machinery of government will have to be incorporated into the new Germany. So Bonn needs to give it a clean bill of health as far as the East German people are concerned. This is very difficult, not least because nearly everybody who has a leading role in the state administration was linked to the secret police, the Stasi. It has been revealed that at least 40 ministers in the new parliament were involved with the Stasi in the past: of these it is rumoured that 24 belong to the CDU.

The state could launch an anti-communist purge in an attempt to establish its legitimacy, but this would raise all sorts of uncomfortable questions about the past role of people in authority everywhere in the East. Given the complicity of almost the entire personnel of the state apparatus in the old regime, a purge of former Stalinists would cause more problems than it solved. This may change in the future—for example, if the state needs to derail popular unrest with

an anti-communist campaign. But the authorities would prefer to avoid such a course of action.

Imagine the difficulties facing the interior minister Peter-Michael Diestel, who has the difficult job of promoting a positive image of the new security apparatus, which is made up of many former members of the Stasi. This is the context in which Diestel launched a campaign against former members of the Red Army Faction, with the firm backing of the authorities in Bonn. Of course, everybody knew that these people had been there for years and many had settled down to have a family. But the aim of the exercise was to establish a new role for the security forces and thus earn the respect of East Germans.

Earning the respect of the working class for the institutions of the state will certainly be an uphill struggle. Workers are being hit hard by factory closures, unemployment and high prices, but none of this changes the fact that the dominant response from the working class is an intensified hostility towards the old system and everything associated with it.

Hating the past

In this situation, the hot autumn of industrial unrest anticipated by political commentators is unlikely to materialise. Of course, everybody is angry about the present state of affairs. Everybody fears for their job. Everybody is apprehensive about the future. But overriding all these emotions is a violent hatred for the old order and a desperate desire to escape from it.

The fervent hope of every worker is that the market will bring them a better standard of living, even if they have to suffer for a few years to get it. Workers desperately want something better, but their fear of fouling up the introduction of the market holds them back from taking serious strike action against redundancies or low wages. Many workers say that if the economy cannot pay more they will not push too hard for higher wages.

The response of the working class to the new situation is coloured by the past. Understandably, workers do not see the market as the problem: they blame the old system and the old bureaucrats for all the privations they are suffering now. It is common to hear workers saying they are prepared to strike, but only to get rid of the old bureaucrats.

In the West, most radical commentators have completely misassessed the aspirations and mood of the working class in East Germany. It is generally accepted that it is only a matter of time before

workers start to fight the introduction of the capitalist market. It is also widely accepted that the left will play an important role in rallying working class resistance, perhaps in alliance with the Party of Democratic Socialism.

This scenario is an unlikely one. Above all else, workers in East Germany want exactly what West German workers have got—access to the consumer goods which can give them better living standards. And the only way they see of getting it is through the capitalist market. After 40 years of eating dirt under Stalinism, capitalism appears the only viable alternative. Whatever their fears for the future, East German workers' overriding concern is to escape the past. They will think long and hard before doing anything which might endanger their chance of a better life in a new capitalist Germany.

There is nothing wrong with workers striving for the material goods which make for a better life. In fact, the working class would not survive if it did not aspire to improve its conditions of existence. To have any chance of gaining influence in the working class, the left in East and West Germany has got to be able to connect with these aspirations for a better future. The problem is that the left on both sides of the border cannot relate to the new situation because it is still stuck in the past. This is best illustrated by the West German left's growing links with East Germany's old Stalinist rulers, who now call themselves the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS).

Left behind

The working class wants nothing to do with the PDS. Michael Wuttig, a PDS councillor in Berlin, told *Living Marxism* that if workers did go on strike they would not welcome the support or involvement of his party. In fact, the only people who seem to want anything to do with his party are the left. The House of Democracy in East Berlin belongs to the PDS: it is home to the United Left; the Greens; Democracy Now; and other radical groups living off PDS hospitality. The party is keen to ingratiate itself in ways other than providing free accommodation: it wants to give DM14.5m to newly founded political groups. But the left's link with the PDS is political as well as financial. The United Left mourns the passing of East Germany almost as much as the PDS. Its nostalgia for the old Stalinist state means that it cannot relate even to the most basic working class aspirations for a better life.

The left's nostalgia for the old Stalinist state means that it cannot relate even to the most basic working class aspirations for a better life

Queen Mummary

On a glorious day in August I found myself sitting with a friend on the rustic terrace of an ancient pub. We sat drinking beer and gazing at shoals of dark fish lurking about in the frothing stream. The rotting timber bridge, the rushes choking the river bank and the thick glutinous slime were all reassuringly pastoral. However, the jugs of Pimms and the smart manners of our fellow customers were a bit of a let down. Overwhelmed and outclassed we moved on.

Under a motorway, down a back road, past a fishing contest, our ramble brought us to a tiny hamlet. Eleven old houses scattered around a bend in the road. Their walls bright with white weather-shield paint, their thatched roofs (securely tied down with unobtrusive netting) and their *jardins Anglais*, stuffed full with hollyhocks, were uplifting. As we rounded the bend my heart skipped a beat. There, strung out across the road, was a single strand of Union Jack bunting. It is true that on closer inspection it turned out to be a plastic strip with little red, white and blue triangles printed on it, but it still meant bunting, and bunting, I knew, meant 'village fete'.

We paid 20p each and entered a large sparsely populated field. The local fire brigade had brought an engine for the kids to scramble over, and a man asked us to try our luck at crushing mothballs with a hammer. They made us very welcome. While drinking tea and eating little cakes in the parish hall it slowly dawned on me...none of these people lived in the hamlet. None of them were rich enough. They had all come from somewhere else. We had stumbled upon the *re-enactment* of a village fete.

Everyone involved thought it was a traditional fete. And I suppose in some sense it was. It was rather like the tradition of standing outside Clarence House every 4 August and singing 'Happy birthday' to the Queen Mum. It hasn't been happening for very many years but it feels as English as thatched cottages; as traditional as jugs of Pimms on a summer day; as festive as plastic flags in a village street.

If it feels like Olde England then it is. Like the Queen Mum's farewell tour, if it seems traditional then it is. It will soon be time for the Queen Mum to be 'gathered'. Her body will be dragged on a gun carriage through the grief-stricken streets to lie in

state at the Westminster Hall. London's plane trees will stand sentinel as the death march squeals eerily above the silent crowds. Millions will pause in sad reflection. It will be like losing a part of ourselves. Before this final drama it is surely entirely reasonable that we should have a grand obituary pageant; 12 months of extra special Queen Mum visits and celebrations. It gives us a chance to wander down the years of a crowded century; years crowded with shared joy and pain. This is what the Queen Mum is all about.

HRH Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother is an archetypal British institution. Ancient in form, modern in content. Apparently useless, but desperately necessary. As the Duchess of York she created a suburban bourgeois family with hubby Prince Albert and the little princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. It was a story carefully told by Lady Cynthia Asquith in her authorised revelation: *The Married Life of Her Royal Highness the Duchess of York*. It was the story of a new kind of royalty. Dad, quiet and hardworking, bathing the kids when he came home from the office. Mum, always there, patient and adorable. Between them, Cynthia Asquith and the Duchess of York promoted the life of the family. The Duchess became impresario of her own children.

Elizabeth born in 1926 and Margaret Rose four years later were carefully turned into a publicity cult. Their clean white poise was a symbol for good children everywhere. It was an image of tranquillity as solid as parquet floors, as reliable as bow-fronted villas in avenues hedged with privet. While Edward the Prince of Wales was carrying on with Mrs Freda Dudley Ward, then Lady Thelma Furness, and finally (as King Edward VIII) with Mrs Wallis Simpson, the sweet harmony of the Duke and Duchess of York, and the playful decorum of their little princesses, gave the press something decent to ooh and aah about. Life was invariably sunny with the Yorks. Their modest household in Piccadilly was always a suitable topic for benign chat and healthy gossip.

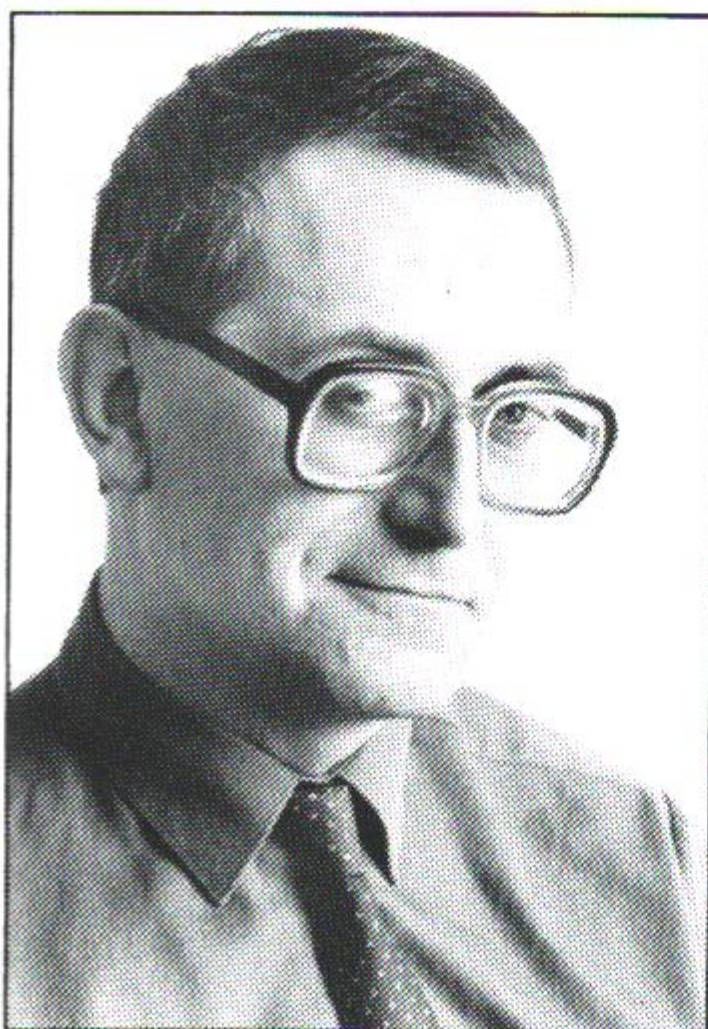
When, in 1936, King Edward was sacked the Yorks moved from Piccadilly to Buckingham Palace. The reign of the young couple with a small modern family commenced. Norman Hartnell was called in to do the new Queen Consort's frocks. The King explained that he wanted her to look frothy

and sensuous. Cecil Beaton did the photographs, Dorothy Wilding designed the stamps and Gerald Kelly made a start on the state portraits. When the war broke out Hartnell redesigned the Queen's day wear. Henceforth she would look like a concerned and well-padded matron. Just bright enough for optimism, but without insulting luxury. Equipped with hat, handbag and sensible chunky high heels she picked her way through the rubble of war-torn streets and into our hearts.

Nobody is really expected to believe the Dowager Viscountess Hambledon when she recalls the hunger on the royal train brought about by rationing. When Sir Martin Gilliat reported, more recently, that the Queen Mum insists on signing all her own Christmas cards we are not really supposed to gasp in astonishment. It is an open secret: the Queen Mum is a 'tough old bird' who is regularly fortified with gin and tonic. She has spent her entire life dressing up and being charming. She has never done a stroke of work. We all know that her radiant warmth, her steadfast courage, her sense of duty and her grace are simply a patriotic parody of the pride and love we feel for Britain. It is a parody we can all parody. We can laugh at ourselves adoring the Queen Mum in the full knowledge that she's an impostor. Like Britain she's not really great. She's just the last Empress of India teetering about in hats designed by Zdenko Rudolf, the last of the Czech nobility.

This is the Queen Mum's secret. She is able to mask the unpleasant feelings provoked by national failure and decline in the organza and tulle of tradition. She is a nice white lady who is good at being measured for gowns, strolling in gardens and posing for cameras. The inventor of the royal walkabout (the Queen with the 'common touch'), she is a prized heirloom, a national treasure. Still vivacious, and with a dash of humour that would be inappropriate in her daughter, the Queen Mum is a tangible link with imperial greatness.

I don't begrudge her this ninetieth birthday celebration because I know it will shortly be followed by the funeral. When she rattles down the Mall for the last time there will not be a dry eye. The Windsors, the Thatchers and the Kinnocks will bitterly regret her passing. Unfortunately, they will not be alone. But I shall be glad to see the back of her. Because with her, into that tomb at Frogmore, will go all the detritus of English greatness. No matter how hard Charles and Di and the Princess Royal try they are not going to be able to embody the Raj, 'Jerusalem', the WI, the Blitz, Vera Lynn or 'our finest hour'. Fortunately, only the Queen Mum can do that.



'The Queen Mother is an archetypal British institution. Ancient in form, modern in content. Apparently useless, but desperately necessary'

Living

The 'Nude' tour

The Prince's new clothes?

Robert Charles has been following Prince's 'Nude' tour and the career of His Royal Badness

Every so often students of Prince predict a return to his roots. I suppose that the title of his tour, 'Nude', does hint at a stripping down to the bare essentials, but tracing the roots of the Prince phenomenon is not easy. In the first place did it grow or was it constructed? Didn't the late seventies lonely inadequate boy, Prince Nelson, reinvent himself in the privacy of his own mind, and recast himself in front of a mirror? Isn't that what the lawless libido was all about? His first compositions were certainly calculatedly controversial smut; the album covers carried stickers warning or boasting of offensive and explicit material. As ever with Prince there was more than met the eye. His rampant sexuality was always more than just a gimmick. As he said in 1981 on WHYT radio in Detroit, 'The lyrics of a dirty mind come straight from the heart'.

In any event his megalomaniac ambition had to find an identity which was suitably distinct from the predominantly MOR Minneapolis 'vanilla' market in which he had to trade. The crucial thing about Prince is that he has always had the substance to back up the hype. The key to his subsequent success was the thoroughness with which he mastered both recording techniques and a wide range of instruments before he was 'discovered'. Even then Warner Brothers showed remarkable prescience for a major label in 1977 when they made him their most expensive new signing ever and gave him the unprecedented opportunity of producing his own record.

Experimentation, black-white crossover and an insatiable appetite for new styles were the hallmarks of his early work. Even at that stage he

was more than proficient in rhythm 'n' blues, gospel, jazz, funk and rock. Obvious role models were Little Richard, Sly Stone, James Brown and Jimi Hendrix. Prince: 'People didn't understand our attempts to budge the worlds of rock/funk/jazz. They thought we were gay or freaks. But we were wild and free with no holds barred.'

Now that Sly Stone is the most sampled performer around, and every other band is taking the drum intro from James Brown's 'Into the jungle groove' and looping it into their own stuff, it has become clear just how far ahead Prince was. The psychedelic funk of his 1985 album 'Around the world in a day' was reprocessing the spirit of the sixties years before Manchester was famous for something other than a fading football team.

The experimentation with his own persona continued apace with the music. In 'If I was your girlfriend' (on the 1987 album 'Sign 'o' the times') he inverts sexual stereotypes in a genuinely disturbing way, harking back to some lines from his very first album, 'I wanna be your lover, mother and sister too'.

The backing singer 'Camille' who is credited on several of his compositions is really an electronically treated Prince singing falsetto. The cover of the 'Sign 'o' the times' single features a woman's body with the face obscured by a black heart. Many people, encouraged by the combined male/female gene logo as the backdrop for his gigs, assumed that this was Prince dressed up. In fact it was all a false lead; the cover girl was his girlfriend Cat Glover. In a period when popular music didn't seem naughty never mind dangerous Prince, with his celebrations of incest and oral sex, provided something to talk about.

The real talking point however should have been his prodigious quality output. Over the last decade, in the time it took Michael Jackson to deliver three albums, Prince released a dozen albums, two films and designed and choreographed extensive tours. The *Batman* soundtrack took him six weeks. The \$20m revenue from the *Purple Rain* film enabled him to build a \$10m multimedia production facility called Paisley Park. Coming soon is the release of a new film and double album soundtrack, 'Graffiti bridge'.

His influence has been enormous. Over 80 of his songs have been covered by other artists, with top-10 success too, including 'Kiss' (Tom Jones), 'Sign of the times' (Simple Minds) and 'Nothing compares 2 U' (Sinead O'Connor). He has written top-10 hits for others including 'I feel for you' (Chaka Khan), 'Manic Monday' (The Bangles) and 'Sugar walls' (Sheena Easton). He formed the highly successful Time funk outfit as an outlet for his harder, blacker songs. He has launched several careers on his Paisley Park label writing and collaborating himself under a variety of pseudonyms. Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis from his band Revolution are now producers in their own right, responsible for Janet Jackson's output. Other members Wendy and Lisa are now pursuing solo careers.

Prince is always reworking his material and his band. Even on the current 'Nude' tour, which is basically a showcase for his hits, there is much innovation. The only survivor from the original Revolution line-up, Dr Fink, has to work extra hard to incorporate the missing horn section into his keyboard arrangements. A new addition is Game Boyz, a meticulously rehearsed outfit of



PHOTO: Warner Brothers

four black male dancers choreographed Prince-style and very serious about the party in hand. The stage bursts into life with Prince's entrance and the entire troupe is silhouetted against cascading varillite orbs. His Royal Badness steps out, looks supremely confident, teasing and pouting: the perfectly formed partyman, the androgynous Cupid, the rude-boy wonder, the precocious dauphin, the imp of the perverse.

Once again the real display is of the wide range of his talent—the wah wah funk groove of 'The future' and '1999', the spartan minimalism of 'Kiss', the comic downtown jive of 'Housequake' and a breathtakingly tight chicken scratch funk rhythm on an up-tempo version of 'Alphabet Street'. He proves again with 'Purple rain' that he can turn out the set-piece anthems like the best of them, and play the guitar in a way that would make Hendrix proud. In a more restrained moment he reclaims 'Nothing compares 2 U' in an effective soulful version. And with backing vocalist Rosie Gaines he performs a sophisticated jazz-blues piano-vocal duet, and then shows off his own skills even further with some smooth Telecaster improvisation. It was the sort of turn which made Miles Davis remark recently, 'You'd be surprised by how much Prince knows. He's playing as good as any jazz musician I know'.

The show includes a taster from the new album, 'Question of U', an excuse for some erotic writhing with the mike-stand in an obvious send-up of his own image. He has been known in the past to suddenly remark on stage, 'If you believe any of this you're a bigger fool than I am'. This time however he says nothing before hurtling into a revamped nineties hard funk version of the Prince manifesto, 'Controversy', in which he spits media questions back at the hacks; and he ends with a funk jam based around a substantially reworked 'Batman/ Partyman'.

'Potty Purple Pain'

What we see of Prince is what he wants us to see. No press interviews since 1985, and inadequate snippets of information through unofficial fan clubs. He has consciously constructed an elaborate fantasia into which no strangers are allowed to intrude. On one level this must be simple commercial calculation. He needs a sealed world to keep his precious mystique safe. The tabloids call him 'Potty Purple Pain' (the *Star*) or simply 'Ponce' (the *Sun*), clearly threatened by a black man of uncertain sexuality with a massive following among white as well as black youth.

Anyway what does he care? The more fairy liquid he adds to the bubble of speculation the more certain he can be that it will not burst. On another level however a lot of this is genuine eccentricity, the product of extreme individuation and mystical, quasi-religious nonsense. The 'Lovesexy' album (1988) for example elevates the physical act of sex to a transcendental religious experience—he dedicates his orgasms to God. That was a real hit with the God Squad who burned his albums by the thousand. The real fans love his fantasies however. Halfway through one of the July sets at Wembley they were chanting en masse 'Live 4 love, B 4 love' like it was their favourite mantra.

The 'Nude' tour is in fact stingy by Prince standards, lacking (if that is the right word) the extravagant props and paraphernalia of previous tours. It does not signal a return to his roots, nor is it a real venture into his future. It is a consolidation of his achievements to date. He's aiming some of his greatest hits at his new-found European teen audience. And they are very grateful that the most consistently creative singer, songwriter, musician, entertainer and producer of the past decade has deigned to come among them.

Berliner Ensemble

Love and Revolution

John Fitzpatrick talked to producer Luke Dixon about the visit to London of the Berliner Ensemble

In September 1949 just a few days before the foundation of the German Democratic Republic, Bertolt Brecht founded the Berliner Ensemble. He had returned to East Berlin after 15 years of exile in Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the USA. The company was to become one of the most celebrated and influential theatre groups in the world. This September three actors from the Ensemble will perform a cabaret 'Love and the Revolution' in London, at the Drill Hall Arts Centre, probably a matter of days before the effective dissolution of the East German state. It will be an historic occasion for another reason. For the first time, Brecht's granddaughter, Johanna Schall, will perform with the Ensemble, joining leading members Carmen-Maja Antoni and Karl-Heinz Nehring.

'Mac the Knife'

Luke Dixon is a freelance theatre director. He first worked with the Ensemble two years ago when he arranged for them to visit a Brecht festival in Harlow, Essex, and then on a tour of British universities. Now he is staging 'Love and the Revolution' on what will be the first visit of the Ensemble to London for many years. Devised by Carmen-Maja Antoni and Johanna Schall, the cabaret will present a broad selection of Brecht's work from famous songs like 'Mac the Knife' and 'Surabaya Johnny' to his more obscure love poems.

Dixon believes that recent events in Germany have made it possible for the Ensemble to extend both its selection and presentation of Brecht's work. 'After his death in 1956, certainly after the death of his wife [Helene Weigel who took over the Ensemble until her death in 1971], their work tended to reflect the attitude of the state. Not directly, but in the choice and style of the material. It had become rather old-fashioned and partial, and had lost its cutting edge.'

He speaks highly of the German cabaret tradition which he believes is incomparably stronger than anything in Britain. 'In both East and West Germany there is a genuinely political, musically based cabaret, which is much more trenchant, much more well-informed than anything that passes for cabaret over here. There has been no political theatre here of any consequence since the sixties and seventies. There's factional theatre—women's, gay or black theatre, but no companies of any significance addressing broader political issues.'

What impact would unification have on the Ensemble itself? 'There are two sides to it. On the artistic side it will be much more open to wider influences, to the more innovative strands of Western theatre. It will be less of a museum; well that's not fair, but it has been inevitably reverential. On the other hand the theatre in the GDR was wonderfully resourced compared to West Germany and beyond the wildest dreams of this country. Seat prices were kept to a remarkably low level. Anybody in the GDR could afford to see the Berliner Ensemble.' Whether many would have wanted to see it when its work was so reverential in its attitude towards the Stalinist regime is another matter.

To British audiences Dixon wants to bring out the political relevance of Brecht. 'He was a showman, a man of the theatre, but he understood that you could be politically active and entertaining. He was immersed in politics and what he was saying in the twenties and thirties is relevant today. Only a few weeks ago his gravestone in Berlin was daubed with the words "Jewish pig", and the Ensemble have asked for it to be left like that as a reminder of how difficult things are becoming.'

Brecht's poems and songs, to the music of Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler, can certainly stand on their own, and this cabaret will be a welcome opportunity to hear them. It should be remembered however that many of them were written for his plays. They were very much part of Brecht's attempt to provide a popular and accessible but also a challenging and critical political theatre. The songs survive today often more despite that fact than because of it, as companies here have generally chosen to steer clear of his work (apart

from *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mother Courage*) on account of its didacticism.

Fair enough perhaps, but this can mean that the songs, carefully written not only in the context of a dramatic development, but also to be performed 'in character' can lose in another presentation. Songs about the militant aspirations of a working class mother in Germany in the thirties or about the daydreams of a chambermaid can come out very differently if sung in concert (even when it's called cabaret).

Brecht was very particular about how his actors spoke and sang, and 'in character' did not mean in a traditionally naturalistic mode. In 1938 he wrote, 'I have developed a very particular technique for capturing the spoken word, (be it prose or verse). I call it gestic [*gestisch*]. This means that language should mimic the gestures of the person speaking it'. Clearly, this was not a technique he necessarily applied to his songs, but it gives a clue to the importance he attached to the performance of his work.

What Brecht would have made of Ute Lemper's current rendition of his songs we'll never know, but Luke Dixon isn't impressed. 'I don't care for them. They're sub-Dietrichesque, too glamorous. You're not listening to what's been said, but to the musical gloss.' He promises that 'Love and the Revolution' will be 'a very hard, very dynamic cabaret in the style I hope Brecht himself would have recognised'. Let's hope so.

• 'Love and the Revolution' by the Berliner Ensemble plays at the Drill Hall Arts Centre (071 631 1353) on 4-9 September and 11-13 September

Pedro Almodovar

Tales of the unexpected

Joe Boatman surveys the work of the prolific Spanish director Pedro Almodovar as another of his films, *Dark Habits*, is released in London

The best of Pedro Almodovar has a habit of popping up in Britain in the wake of his more recent and successful, but less satisfying work.

No sooner had *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, his seventh feature, brought him international recognition than the older and better films, *Law of Desire* (1987) and *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) were released here. Now his hilarious and biting *Dark Habits* (1983) has appeared hard on the heels of his latest film, the controversial but to me disappointing *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*

Dark Habits has all the essential Almodovar ingredients, apart from a long title: crazy plot, preposterous characters, garish sets, sparkling wit and a healthy disrespect for the conventions and institutions which try to bridle human appetites. The family, the police and the church are favourite targets. In *Dark Habits* the Convent of the Humble Redeemers has lost both its source of finance and its function (murderers, prostitutes and drug addicts are no longer submitting themselves for redemption). The nuns, still hoping to provide 'refuge, solace and fun', have developed a new morality, and new habits. They remain humble, after a fashion, adopting ostentatiously offensive

names: Sisters of Sin, Rat, Snake and Manure. The Mother Superior sighs in worship over a collection of screen siren pin-ups 'some of our great sinners. Jesus died for them and thanks to them Our Lord returns to Earth each day'. There's lesbianism, masochism, cocaine and acid too. A visiting Reverend Mother briskly debunks their warped logic: 'Nothing is so close to pride as excessive humiliation.'

The peculiar ways in which desire and its fulfilment are channelled and thwarted are what interests Almodovar: the endless interplay between what we're supposed to want, what we do want, what we've got and what we can't get in endless combinations of happy coincidence and painful contradiction. One thing is for certain, he never settles for emotional happiness, material comfort and a simple, balanced, happy ending.

In *Women on the Verge...* the wealthy heroine returns from the brink of dementia with the ability to recognise that, despite the hurricane of anger and despair that's swept through her life, she is surviving without the lover who derailed her by leaving. In *Tie Me Up!* the old idea of a stormy love story moving inexorably towards harmonious equilibrium is undermined right from the outset. This time the hero wants to get married

immediately—but then he's certifiably insane. He literally has to tie a woman up in order to get her to listen to his proposal. That doesn't mean however that he has no hope of getting her to tie the knot. After all, as an ex-prostitute/junkie/porn actress a lot of other options are already closed to her. The story makes you think about what exactly might be normal *and* sane, but it hovers dangerously close to making a pretty banal observation about how dependency and commitment, however expressed, are what relationships are really all about.

Law of Desire is a much more subtle and subversive film. It tells the story of a three-sided love affair heated with passions, sexual, jealous and murderous. It opens with a director, starting to breathe heavily, instructing an actor to go through the motions of sexual excitement. The actor himself is unmoved until, his work completed, he gets paid. The first spontaneous kiss we see is the one he plants gently on the wad of money. The law of desire is that what you want, when you boil it right down, is nothing more, less or other than what you want, and no law, legal or moral, can confine or define its object. It may be love and sex, it may be power and possession; it may be the former to facilitate the latter, it may be vice versa. The irrelevance of the particular forms which desire takes is underlined by the fact that it is simply not an issue in the film that the three corners of this triangle are all occupied by males. In fact not even a committed homophobe could find evidence here of any relevance of gender to the dynamics of desire.

The intensity of subjective perception is also dealt with in *Women on the Verge...* where it is counterposed obliquely to the 'realities' around the heroine. As she sets fire to her bed in frustration a close friend who is involved with an 'international terrorist-on-the-run' takes refuge in her flat. Refusing attention to her friend's plight even when it is broadcast on TV, she watches without seeing the rearrangement of all the personal relationships among her acquaintances. At the culmination of a farcical plot virtually the entire cast, including two cops, are lying around her flat in stupors having drunk the spiked gazpacho intended for her lover. As they begin to wake up she comes to her senses. It is an entertaining metaphor for how we relegate the rest of our lives when love hurts.

Victims of circumstance

Almodovar doesn't focus on the overwhelming imaginative force of the human psyche (particularly when it's disturbed) just so he can deliver a vivid storyline. He positively celebrates the potential that is routinely stunted by circumstance. *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* provides a critique of woman's oppression within the family which rejects the institution but regrets the ensuing loss of personal relations. There are no idealised alternatives on offer but Almodovar seems confident that from the seeds of personal affection something better will bloom.

What Have I Done...? starts with a 360 degree pan around the restrictive dimensions of a Madrid flat, the limited space in which working wife and mother Gloria tries to cope with a selfish husband, stingy mother-in-law, drug-dealing teenage son and an ever-hungry younger boy. At one point the boy responds to the accusation that he's been in bed with his friend's father rather than doing his homework by shrugging, 'So what? It's my body'. His mother sighs that the man might at least have fed him. Again Almodovar casually marginalises what we've been taught to think of as central, and forces us to think anew about some other relations. In the course of another crazy plot, involving the prostitute next door, an impotent cop, a German writer, a lizard called Money and a lecherous dentist, the entire family is outrageously despatched. Alone now and without the motivation of keeping the family together Gloria stands on the balcony and contemplates suicide. Another pan,

this time around the housing estate, suggests that every unit contains (in both senses) lives and aspirations both as desperate and colourful as her own.

It is typical of Almodovar's iconoclasm that film itself is quite often in his sights. In particular the pretension of the film-maker to a position of authority is roundly mocked. In both *Law of Desire* and *Tie Me Up!* film directors feature as voyeuristic characters. In the latter the director is wheelchair bound, the implication being that while he has the power over what we are to watch, like us he can only watch it too. In *Women on the Verge...* the heroine is a dubbing actress whose work doing voice-overs reveals layers of distinction between what she feels, what she sounds like and what we

see. It is episodes like these which also challenge the audience to confront its own role in the process, for example, its collusion in the voyeurism.

Almodovar may be shedding some of his rougher and more subversive edges as he becomes more popular, but all of his films are undoubtedly worth a look. His particular pleasure and skill in the medium is plain to see. Clever plots can be developed in books, witty dialogue delivered well on radio, but Almodovar's striking cast of actors and gloriously lurid sets can only be *seen*. His films have a heightened clarity which lends itself to the comic but is also tinged with the surreal. With Almodovar you never know quite what to expect.

• *Dark Habits* opens at the Metro Cinema, London, on 31 August

Bolshevik art

Agitpot

Nat Edwards went to see some rare examples of revolutionary ceramics recently acquired by the British Museum



One of the most striking and enduring forms of Bolshevik art was the agitprop porcelain produced at the State Porcelain Factory in Petrograd in the years following the 1917 Russian Revolution. Ten such plates have just been purchased by the British Museum and are now on display alongside other examples of agitprop and suprematist porcelain in the museum's Modern Gallery.

The designs on the plates were mostly added to pre-revolutionary blanks produced at the factory when it was the Imperial Porcelain Factory, producing service and presentation pieces for the Romanov dynasty. Unlike many of the agitprop works in other media, such as posters, wall newspapers, banners and plaster or concrete sculpture, they retain the colour and vigour of the day they were produced.

Ranging from elegantly scripted slogans such as 'Knowledge in your head means food in your belly' to heroic revolutionary figures such as a red worker trampling capital underfoot, the bold colours and stunning execution bear witness to the explosion of proletarian power and creative forces unleashed by the revolution.

The period after October 1917 was one of great upheaval. The Bolsheviks understood the need for new and immediate forms of propaganda. Alongside Leon Trotsky's Red Army which defended the revolutionary dictatorship on the military front, the Bolsheviks set up the People's Commissariat for Public Enlightenment (Narkompros) under Anatoly Lunacharsky to win the propaganda battle with wider layers of the Soviet people. Lunacharsky involved artists from every discipline in the agitprop campaign.

Agitprop trains toured the battlefronts and the countryside, monuments were built, films were shown and festivals staged throughout the land. Thanks to the foresight of Sergei Chekhonin, a revolutionary arts and crafts specialist, the State Porcelain Factory came under the aegis of Narkompros in March 1918. It ceased churning out rather substandard pre-revolutionary patterns and enlisted an army of new artists to the agitprop cause. Among them were well-known artists such as Vasily Kandinsky and others who had no professional experience but who displayed the innovation and commitment inspired by their new role in the revolution.

Inspiration for the new art came from many

places. Traditional Russian visual forms such as icons and luboks (illustrated broadsides) as well as pre-revolutionary satirical journals all had an influence, as can be seen in the very figurative historicist pieces by Vasily Timorev ('From heroic military deeds to labour heroic deeds and from labour heroic deeds to military heroic deeds') or in the peasant-inspired floral decoration on Chekhonin's early decorative constructivist plate.

But the prime inspiration shouts out at the observer through the vital dance of forms, figures, slogans and colours on each plate, whether it is in a traditional, folk, constructivist or suprematist style: that is the excitement generated when the creativity of the proletariat was injected into an industry that had previously stagnated in the service of a particularly degenerate section of the bourgeoisie.

Although these plates are extremely rare, they provide a unique commentary on the period in which they were produced. Posters tear, ink fades, plaster is washed away and histories can be rewritten. But the bright glazes on the agitprop porcelain are as sharp as they were on the day they were produced.

Go to the British Museum to see the plates, which will be on permanent display until they are incorporated into a planned exhibition of twentieth-century artefacts at the end of 1991. There is very little published in English on revolutionary ceramics, but one book worth taking a look at is *Revolutionary Ceramics: Soviet Porcelain 1917-1927* by Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky (Rizzoli Books, New York 1990). It contains illustrations of some of the plates now in the British Museum, as well as of forms other than plates such as Kasimir Malevich's suprematist teapot and Natalya Danko's 'The Reds and the Whites' chess set. It also provides a useful introduction to the history of the State Porcelain Factory.

Unfortunately, the rarity and artistic merit of agitprop porcelain have meant that most of it has ended up in the private collections of wealthy connoisseurs. As a result, it is viewed largely as having an historical, documentary or even curiosity value to be realised in the sale room. At worst, agitprop is seen as it is by Lobanov-Rostovsky as an attempt by a failing government to con its subjects. A lunchtime spent in the British Museum will prove otherwise.

Paddy Haycocks - the uncut version

Dante called it the City of Sorrows—the gloomy maze through which we search endlessly for our own lost souls. *Dick Tracy*, *Batman* and *Robocop* have all been down its mean streets recently and now they have been joined by another alienated eternal outsider—Paddy Haycocks. Paddy took a turn at presenting *As It Happens* (Channel 4). He got to wander around London pestering people with his film crew and show the results in the programme's 11am weekday slot.

The gimmick of *As It Happens* is that they don't edit. If it happened, you see it. This gives the show a certain spontaneity—though a lot of the interviewees do seem surprisingly unsurprised when somebody shoves his hairy mike at them. It also gives it a bewitchingly relaxed pace that marks it out from the fidgety cutting of most daytime TV. It has a Chas and Dave piano theme tune played over *Sesame Street* graphics and this combined with the choice of target—cheery cockney craftsmen whistling while they work—gives it an upbeat tempo that only serves to underline the show's mesmerisingly scary message: the centre cannot hold.

When Paddy went out pointing his camera, everywhere he looked crazy things were happening. He soon came across a man from the Met winching an illegally parked car on to the back of his truck. The car was outside its owner's front door at the time and the owner came rushing out to protest and offer to move it, 'I was having a bath or I would have done it sooner'. Of course it was more than the man's job was worth to accept her offer so she appealed to Paddy who didn't want to get involved. But he did want to go on filming, so he offered her a lift down to the pound to reclaim the car, and she said he was very kind. He asked her if this had happened before, and she said that it happened all the time, and off they all went.

The fact that the capital is now stagnating, that chaos is now snarling up its every corner, was perfectly expressed here: not just in the lunacy of

the whole situation but in the participants' unfazed acceptance not only of the winching but also of the filming of it for daytime TV. It must have been in just such a zombie-like condition that the commuters of King's Cross brushed past the people at the bottom of the escalator who tried to warn them, and on into the flames.

Paddy grasped the fact that the situation was now beyond analysis or complaint and asked the only question that was still legitimate: 'Have you ever winched any celebrities' cars then?' 'Yeah, I had Dickie Attenborough's roller on the back of me truck once.' Later we met some workmen who were narrowing South Kensington High Street because the tube station below it was collapsing under the volume of traffic. Their job was to cause so much congestion that the traffic would go somewhere else, presumably causing another tube station to collapse. Paddy giggled and moved on.

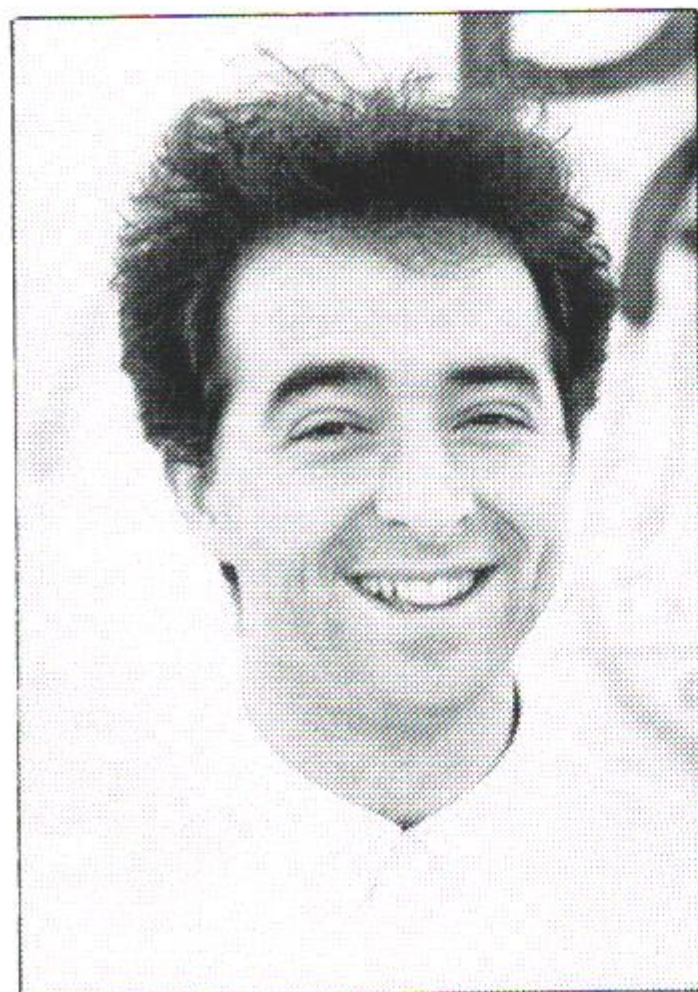
Eisenstein identified the cut as the essence of the art of film. The edit suite is where order is imposed on the material, where reason and argument do their patient work. Paddy has done away with these. In place of the cut that makes the point, we have a one-hour take, a flow of data, each image erasing the last. It is the perfect expression of the capital trance. In fact, at one point in his trip around Soho, Paddy wandered out of Centrepoin—where he talked to someone who was about to be made homeless—into one of the Thames TV edit suites. He got the giggles again before moving swiftly on to a maker of epaulettes.

Sometimes this total abdication of the rational gives rise to some entertaining juxtapositions, as when we panned straight from David Owen's pricey Limehouse pad on to the barge pumping sludge and cess up river. In fact, Owen was priceless. He spotted the far-off glint of the camera lens—at the time cruising along in a river launch—and was downstairs in a new shirt with his hair gelled before you could say desperate. He stood on the landing stage staring down towards the estuary, all washed up in his riverside development.

Which brings us again to the flaw in the *As It Happens* argument. The presence of a camera and sound crew changes everything. It edits as it goes. For instance, in the Soho edition, all kinds of people who you *know* would never smile at or greet a fellow biped were transformed into veritable Sonias of sunshine and goodwill once they saw the tape was turning. Others—those with guilty consciences perhaps—legged it the other way as if Paddy was Roger Cook. One woman even dived into the heavy traffic rather than become part of Roger's rich tapestry. The beauty of the no-edit rule is of course that in doing so she did become an unforgettable part of it: the woman who would rather die.

Maybe the fact that we are so painfully aware of Paddy and his camera evens things up a bit. Paddy is there as the observer, the man who goes down the mean streets but who is not himself mean, to quote Raymond Chandler. Paddy is not himself mean. What he is is very, very stupid. At one point he walks up to a woman in fluorescent leggings who is wearing a plastic crash helmet and elbow pads. She is carrying a huge cycle lock. 'Are you a cyclist?' he asks. On reflection maybe he is more stupefied than stupid, and once again maybe this is the only legitimate question in these circumstances. The cyclist joined in, 'Of course cycling is a lot healthier, even though you can get killed'.

If *As It Happens* is a true reflection of what the city does to people then it is the greatest argument against the centralisation of economic, political and cultural power I have yet come across. People who make decisions about how I live are arriving at work every day in such a state that sentences like that actually make sense to them. Never mind, this autumn Channel 4 will be screening a remix of *The Real Eddy English* in two 90-minute episodes. This is by me so I know it's brilliant.



'Paddy is there as the observer, the man who goes down the mean streets but who is not himself mean, to quote Raymond Chandler'

frank cottrell-boyce

the marxist review of books

Mike Freeman reviews

Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch (eds), *The Retreat of the Intellectuals: Socialist Register 1990*, Merlin Press, £8.95 pbk

Radical rearguard

The collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has consolidated anti-Marxist prejudices as well as a more pervasive cynicism and disillusionment throughout the West. The latest issue of the annual *Socialist Register* focuses on the attacks on Marxism that now emanate from erstwhile left-wing intellectuals as much as from the right. Its 16 separate essays, more than half by North American academics, are edited by the former Leeds professor and Socialist Society patron Ralph Miliband and by the Canadian political scientist Leo Panitch. *Socialist Register's* rearguard action to defend Marxism against its radical detractors starts out from a clear recognition of the danger that the postmodernist outlook in its diverse forms now poses to the project of human emancipation.

Two key essays are Ellen Meiksins Wood's discussion of 'The uses and abuses of "civil society"' and Bryan Palmer's survey of the degeneration of the left's approach to social history. Wood discusses the transformation of Marx's conception of 'civil society' under capitalism as a sphere of atomisation, exploitation and conflict into the currently fashionable radical notion of 'civil society' as a space for the autonomous voluntary association of a plurality of groups and individuals including, among others, employers and workers.

However, for Marx, the relations between capital and labour established in civil society were not simply one among many social relationships, but the very foundation of capitalist society. The conflictual character of capitalist social relations gives rise to the need for a state apparatus to maintain the conditions of continued exploitation in civil society. The fact that relations between capitalists and workers are largely reproduced spontaneously allows the state and its associated political sphere, including the realm of parliamentary democracy, to appear to be independent of the day-to-day business of exploitation in civil society.

Generations of radical reformers have taken the apparent autonomy of the political sphere, and hence its supposed potential for progressive intervention in society, at face value and have concentrated their energies in parliament. Today's post-Marxists have reacted against the failure of such state socialist strategies, East and West, and have set about trying to extend the role of democracy in civil society itself. But, whereas the principles of formal democracy can prevail in the process of elections and in the conduct of the house of commons, on the factory or office floor, or on the street or in the home, no such principles prevail. In the polling booth or in parliament, everybody becomes the ideal citizen or his representative, all free and equal before the law. But, at work, citizens are bosses or workers, if they are black or gay they may not be free to walk the streets and if they are women, they find themselves much less than equal both at work and in the home. Civil society is a more coercive and oppressive sphere of life than the

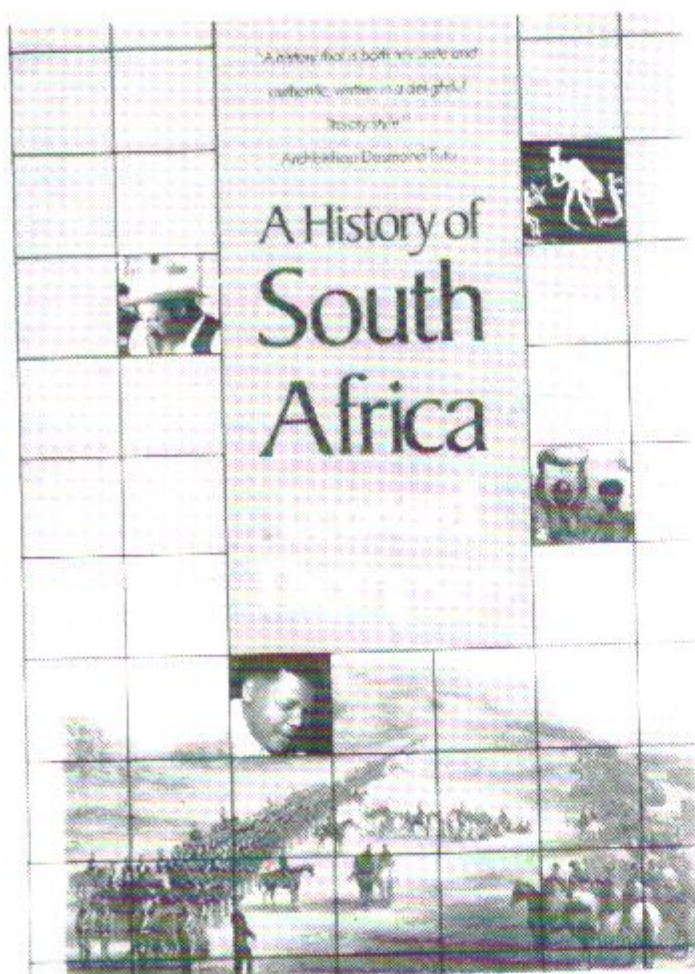
state in modern capitalism, and it is even less susceptible to the methods of democratic reformers.

Marx drew attention to the distinction between civil society and the state to emphasise that the project of human emancipation required a revolution that was not merely political, directed against the existing form of state (like those of 1789 or 1848), but a broader social revolution that tackled the roots of capitalist domination in civil society itself. As Wood demonstrates, today's post-Marxists have dissolved capitalism into an undifferentiated plurality of social institutions and relations and have lost sight of civil society as a distinctive feature of capitalist society: 'What tends to disappear from view...is the relations of exploitation and domination which irreducibly constitute civil society, not just as some alien and correctable disorder but as its very essence, the particular structure of domination and coercion that is specific to capitalism as a systemic totality.'

Wood further argues that the new revisionist celebration of the pluralism and diversity of civil society not only ignores the oppressive reality of this sphere, but leads to a politics of individual identity which denies the primacy of class and ends up reinforcing oppression. As she notes, pluralist theories 'beg the question of capitalism because they fail to deal with its overarching totality as a social system, which is constituted by class exploitation but which shapes all our social relations'. Wood notes too the irony of a diversity promoted through varied patterns of consumption which 'disguises the underlying systemic unity, the imperatives which create that diversity itself while at the same time imposing a deeper and more global homogeneity' (p79). The ultimate irony is that 'what claims to be a more universalist project than traditional socialism is actually less so. Instead of the universalist project of socialism and the integrative politics of the struggle against class exploitation, we have a plurality of essentially disconnected particular struggles'. She concludes with a passionate account of the immiseration produced by modern capitalism in its North American heartland and a spirited insistence on the relevance of Marxism to its transcendence.

Bryan Palmer begins by pointing out that the threat to history comes not only from a right-wing American state ideologue like Francis Fukuyama with his crass 'end of history' thesis, but more seriously from postmodernist theorists who insist on the ascendancy of discourse and representation over the methods of historical materialism. He traces the origins of the current crisis in social history to the emphasis on ideological and cultural factors in the writings of EP Thompson and Raymond Williams, itself a reaction to the narrow economic determinism of much of the Stalinist tradition from which they emerged.

Subsequent historians have pursued this one-sidedness to extremes



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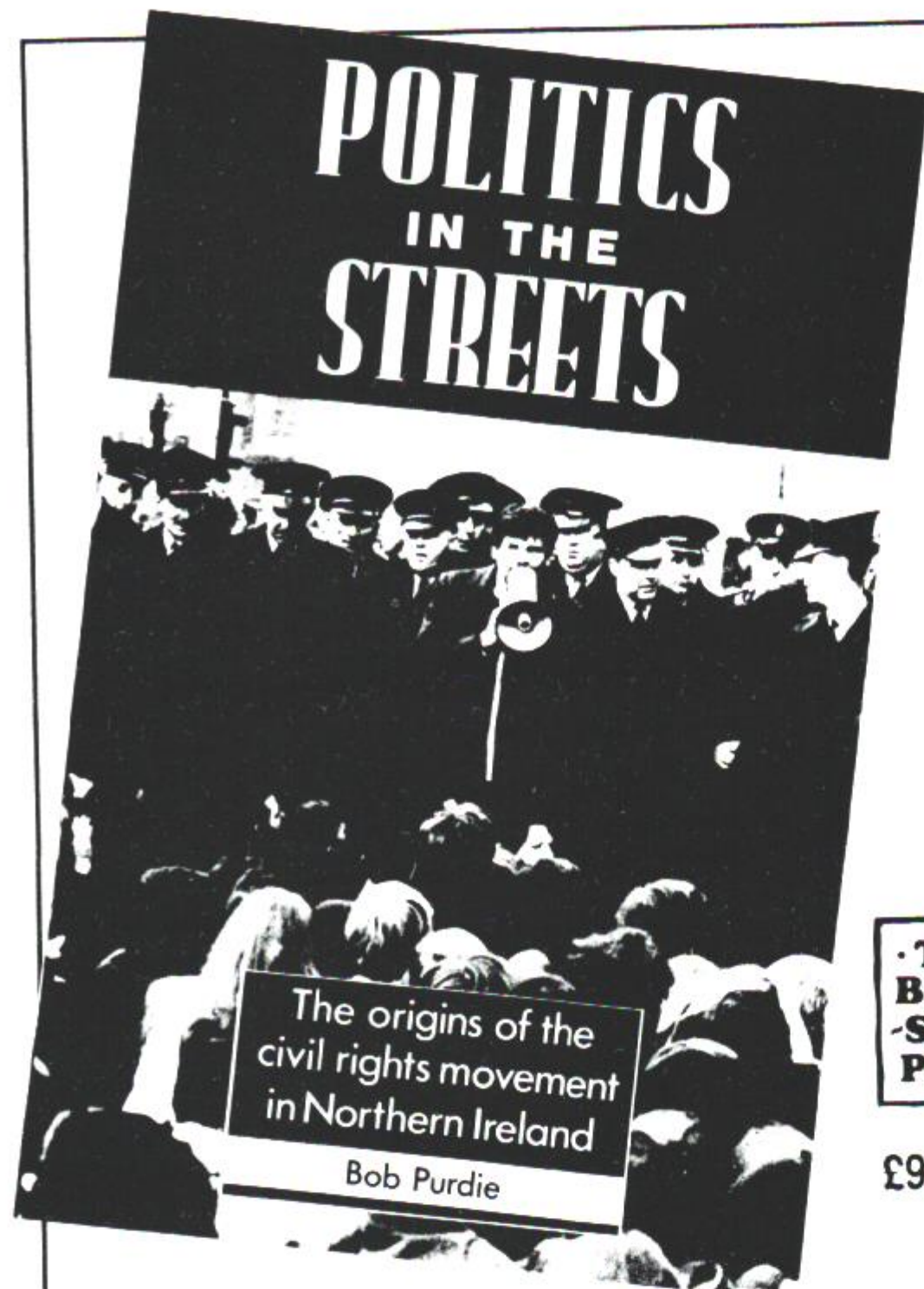
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of 'culturalism', leading to 'the denigration of the material and the reification of the ideal'. Palmer shows that one result of this approach is a number of studies of the American labour movement which deny the salience of class, with a blatantly ideological purpose: 'Out of the language of a classless people comes pluralistic America.' In Britain, Gareth Stedman Jones has offered a reinterpretation of Chartism in terms of language that has encouraged similar linguistic approaches to more contemporary historical problems, such as Michael Ignatieff's infamous repudiation of the 1984-85 miners' strike.

The most familiar target of revisionist historiography is the French Revolution. Palmer reviews François Furet's attack on the traditional radical interpretation and Lyn Hunt's study of the role of symbolism, ritual and language. He demonstrates a common idealistic approach that neglects the 'complex interaction of economic structure and historical agency'. Palmer pursues his critique into historical writing in the sphere of feminism and sexual politics, focusing on the work of Michelle Barrett and Jeffrey Weeks.

He acutely observes the changing subtitle of Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today*, between its first edition in 1980—*Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*—and its 1988 edition—*The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*. The second edition is accompanied by a new introduction heavily influenced by postmodernist anti-Marxism and the notion of sexuality as a timeless discourse. Any prospect of a hyphenated socialist-feminism is now abandoned. Strongly influenced by Michel Foucault's poststructuralism, Weeks argues that 'sexuality is as much about words, images, ritual and fantasy as it is about the body'. He advocates a radical sexual pluralism that submerges the specificity of the oppression of homosexuality in 'a reformist sea of any and all sexualities'. But, as Palmer argues, our bodies are not just the properties of their occupants: 'They must labour and live through exploitation, alienation and oppression.'

The key trend here, as Palmer says, is 'the subjective construction of virtually everything from gender to documentary reality'. Palmer emphasises that resisting 'this plunge into chaos and obscurantism' is an important part of reclaiming historical materialism from the forces of darkness that have gathered in the 1980s. The approach of these two chapters is supported by Norman Geras' witty survey of the 'travesties of Marxism' offered by the revisionist theoreticians in the development of their bold new alternatives; by Terry Eagleton's humorous critique of the absurdities of the 'class, race and gender' triptych of the new radical discourse; and by John Saville's devastating dissection of *Marxism Today*.

So far, so good; indeed these articles amount to a very useful reassertion of Marxism against prevailing revisionist trends. The problem is that this is about as far as it goes. Much of the rest of this issue of *Socialist Register* contradicts the strong points of these chapters and accepts the positions of the post-Marxists on precisely the points on which Wood and Palmer so convincingly challenge them. Indeed one feels that those contributors who broadly endorse the approach of Wood and Palmer are always on the verge of making major concessions to the revisionist argument. In the case of Norman Geras, this fear is amply fulfilled by a glance at his recent collection of essays *Discourses of Extremity* (Verso, 1990).

In his contribution 'Why are we still socialists after all this?', Arthur MacEwan identifies two 'flaws' in Marxism. The first is a tendency 'to view all social conflicts as theoretically secondary and practically of less importance than worker-capitalist struggles'; the

second he calls 'productivism', the fact that Marxism 'has always seen the advancement of production as the well-spring of human progress'. Rejecting the primacy of class struggle and the development of the productive forces leaves little of Marxism intact.

Linda Gordon identifies a 'Marxist, liberal and conservative consensus in privileging the wage form as *the* means of providing for the citizenry'—a criticism of Marxism which could well find a place in Geras' list of caricatures and straw men. Eleanor MacDonald issues a 'general caution against the effectiveness of any grand theory, such as Marx's theory of capital, in adequately interpreting specific historical circumstances', precisely the argument against which Palmer's chapter is directed. Only a few pages after Saville savagely denounces Stuart Hall and his narrowly ideological and subjective conception of hegemonic struggle as reflected in *Marxism Today*, Frederic Jameson warmly endorses Hall's programme. While the editors no doubt did not want to impose rigid guidelines on contributors, such eclecticism on key issues deprives the book of coherence and undermines the impact of the major chapters.

Unfortunately, Ralph Miliband's concluding chapter, rather than resolving these inconsistencies, preserves them. He insists on the primacy of the class struggle, but welcomes 'the quite outstanding contribution which feminism, ecology, anti-racism and other "new social movements" have made'. In reality these movements, largely the responsibility of a left which has turned its back on Marxism and the working class, have had the effect of further discrediting Marxism and intensifying the division of the working class. Their 'contribution' to the cause of human liberation, like that of the Stalinist and social democratic left from which they have arisen, has been on balance a negative one.

Miliband insists on the need for a radical transformation of capitalist society, but only to qualify this insistence with the 'commonsense' observation that this 'must be conceived as a long-term affair, a process which is bound to extend over a very long period, and which may never come to be completed'. Sounds more like reform than revolution! What is to be the agency of this radical transformation? After decades of vacillation over whether British socialists should work within or without the Labour Party, Miliband falls silent on this key question of strategy just when an impending general election gives it more than usual importance. He is silent too about the role of the Socialist Society, which he helped to found, and which is now more and more firmly inserted into the Labour camp. He has no word either for Charter 88, the post-Marxist, post-Labour, post-political project that is now the major initiative of the radical intelligentsia in Britain.

Miliband concludes by emphasising the need for 'socialist education', which he recognises requires 'organised and systematic, institutionalised forms'. But how should such education be organised and by whom? Miliband forgets, as Marx reminded Ludwig Feuerbach, that 'the educator himself needs educating', or he runs the risk of 'dividing society into two parts, of which one is superior to the other'. For Marx, real education, 'the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity', could be 'conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionising practice*'. *Socialist Register* is a useful contribution to demystifying contemporary radical anti-Marxism, but others will have to carry forward the counter-hegemonic struggles it wills but cannot enact.

Charles Longford reviews

Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, Heinemann, £16.95 hbk; Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, Yale University Press, £19.95 hbk

Apartheid: all in the mind?

In many ways it is not surprising that *The Mind of South Africa* has received such good reviews. It is well written and researched and its journalistic style makes it a riveting read. This is what we have come to expect from Allister Sparks, former editor of the liberal English-speaking newspaper the *Rand Daily Mail*. An outstanding journalist, Sparks was nominated for a Pulitzer prize for his reporting on the unrest in South Africa in 1985.

However, there are two other reasons why *The Mind of South Africa* has won acclaim. First, it presents apartheid as the outcome of Afrikaner prejudice and not as the necessary form capitalist social relations had to take in South Africa. This allows Sparks to

argue that the 'arithmetic of apartheid'—black urbanisation and population growth—has forced the Nationalist Party government to alter course: white South Africa 'is being Africanised'. Second, Sparks' equally subjective treatment of the black mind of South Africa leads him to suggest that the reason why black South Africans have not vented their anger in a racial bloodbath is that 'this kind of Fanonesque impulse is alien to the black African mind': 'Something in the African psyche, in that old collective spirit of *ubuntu*, the notion that people are people through other people, diffuses the individual ego and makes it less prone to the phenomena of repressed anger and displaced aggression.'

The central theme of the book is that whites will have to bow to the inevitable while blacks will not seek revenge once the inevitable happens. While this formula will help many whites to sleep peacefully at night, it is seriously flawed. Superficially it could be argued that the negotiations between the ANC and the Pretoria regime vindicate Sparks. Yet Sparks himself highlights developments, such as the impact on the liberation struggle of the collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which indicate that the changes now taking place have little to do with psychology.

The problem with *The Mind of South Africa* is its method of analysis. In his youth, Sparks was deeply impressed by WJ Cash's *The Mind of the South*, a classic study of the American South. In *The Mind of South Africa*, he undertakes a similar psychological history of his own country. Sparks tries to explain South Africa's troubles through a history of ideas. But he separates these ideas from the social and material conditions which gave rise to them in the first place. As a result, the ideas remain the fixed point of reference, which are projected back in time or forward to the future despite the fact that social and political reality has altered fundamentally. Despite his empirically rich study, Sparks delivers an idealistic, ahistorical presentation of South African history.

His treatment of the 'mind of Afrikaner nationalism' is instructive. Sparks dwells on the Afrikaners' belief in their God-given right to rule South Africa. While it is true that Daniel Malan, the first National Party prime minister, invoked God to justify Afrikaner hegemony in South Africa, this does not explain why successive white minority governments have refused to dismantle apartheid. Although he points out that Afrikaner nationalism is composed of antagonistic class interests, Sparks does not elucidate why it took the form of an all-class alliance.

The South African ruling class needed a social base through which to maintain control over society. It built an alliance with white farmers and white workers which was codified in apartheid legislation and cemented together by petty apartheid segregation. It was the drive for profit which forged the white minority apartheid alliance. Apartheid—the denial of democratic rights to the black majority—arose out of the needs of the capitalist class and was not the result of an attachment to the ideas of predestinarian Holland as Sparks would have us believe.

The dangers inherent in this approach become clear when he deals with the mind of black South Africa. In his attempt to explain why blacks have not sought vengeance against their white oppressors, Sparks focuses on their unique psyche which has been carried over from pre-capitalist society up to today. He warns that 'this is not a culture with a built-in attraction to individualistic democracy and free enterprise. Africans may eventually be won over by the perceived advantages of such systems, but in the meantime Westerners should not be surprised that many of them show a more historic affinity for the concept of communalism'.

What nonsense. Sparks is suggesting that the black majority's

dislike of contemporary capitalist South Africa is based more upon an attachment to some communal past than on the experience of apartheid oppression today. Black opposition to apartheid is not articulated in the programme of a revolutionary working class party. But why is this proof of the endurance of instincts from pre-capitalist African societies? All it proves is that there is no anti-capitalist political force in South Africa which can articulate the contemporary aspirations of the black masses.

Sparks' romantic idealisation of the past becomes a barrier to the conscious appreciation of present day reality. The survival of apartheid has little to do with the black man's attachment to past communal traditions. It has everything to do with the political failings of the ANC and its mentor, the South African Communist Party. Sparks has nothing but warm words for these movements. For example, he says that the ANC's Freedom Charter is a 'monument to the remarkable spirit of reconciliation that somehow manages to survive under apartheid and that has acquired a kind of canonical status in the resistance movement'.

The 'spirit of reconciliation' embodied in the Freedom Charter has nothing to do with any attachment to the good old communal days of the past. It expresses the political strategy of a black middle class leadership whose aim is to come to terms with a racist ruling class rather than overthrow it. At the time the charter was formulated there was no possibility of reconciliation: the development of the apartheid economy in the fifties required the oppression of the black majority. The 'spirit of reconciliation' represents a bankrupt political strategy which led to the brutal defeat of the black masses. The fact that the Freedom Charter retains a 'kind of canonical status in the resistance movement' is nothing to cheer about. It indicates that the lessons of the past have not been learned.

In the final chapter of the book, Sparks perceptively charts the impact on the liberation movement of the Stalinist collapse in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He regards all this as positive since it has begun a process which he believes will lead ultimately to black majority rule. The 'big-hearted' Nelson Mandela will be able to hold out a hand of reconciliation to the white minority. History will have come a full circle and everyone will live happily ever after. Except for one thing: negotiations reflect the weakness rather than the strength of the liberation movement. In these circumstances, the hand of reconciliation is in reality the hand of compromise.

Mystifying the past is unfortunately what Leonard Thompson does too in his *History of South Africa*. Although Thompson presents South African history from the standpoint of blacks, which is most welcome, he reproduces a black history which has become the standard interpretation. Thompson simply describes events like the defiance campaign of the fifties. There is no critical commentary, no attempt to analyse, no attempt to offer explanations. We are still waiting for somebody to write the real history of black South Africa, a history which will make the past a conscious guide to the future.

James Heartfield reviews

Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, Verso, £9.95 pbk; Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, Routledge, £9.99 pbk; Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity*, Routledge, £8.95 pbk; Bryan Turner (ed), *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity*, Sage, £25 hbk, £9.95 pbk; Jonathan Rutherford (ed), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, £10.95 pbk; Anthony Woodiwiss, *Social Theory After Postmodernism*, Pluto Press, £24.95 hbk; Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Polity Press, £25 hbk, £10.95 pbk

Staring into the postmodern abyss

The career of Jean Baudrillard spans the postmodern fad, from its beginnings in the demoralisation of France's radical intelligentsia to its modish end in the American universities. His latest book *Cool Memories* carries the postmodern rejection of a sense of mission to its melancholic conclusion. *Cool Memories* is a collection of aphorisms written between 1980 and 1984 which finds Baudrillard the victim of the market he celebrates. His success drives down the quality of his product until finally we are here in his discarded notebooks of the early eighties.

'Ideas of liberation, emancipation and individual autonomy... exhaust themselves', he writes. 'No one is interested in overcoming alienation; the point is to plunge into it to the point of ecstasy.' Baudrillard asks himself whether it is possible to 'grasp a world when you're no longer tied to it by some kind of ideological enthusiasm...? Can things "tell" themselves through stories and fragments?'. The more that he tries to plunge into alienation and let

things tell themselves, the more he gives voice to the narrow prejudices of the middle class intelligentsia. Feminism is 'shitty', transsexuality is 'disturbing', rape and 'terrorism' are a reaction to our 'hypertolerance', 'socialism is destroying the position of the intellectual', the challenges to the West in the Falklands, Palestine and from Islamic peoples are 'feeble-minded...suicidal rhetorics' only marginally less detestable than the imperialist powers. The postmodern rejection of a sense of purpose is revealed in this plague on all your houses approach as the outlook of that class in society which has no independence of purpose: the middle class.

The publication of Michel Foucault's interviews before his death in 1984 is a reminder that the irreverence of postmodernism towards the received opinion of the right and left had a liberatory potential. That potential, however, was hamstrung by its lack of orientation and fear of involvement. Foucault drew attention to questions of the social control exercised through institutions like psychiatry and

social security at a time when the prevailing social democratic consensus assumed these to be wholly good things. His celebration of the Iranian revolution is a challenge to French chauvinism that would elude Jean Baudrillard.

Underpinning his ability to think beyond the accepted norms was a sense of their transience. On the question of healthcare he insists '“Health” is a cultural fact in the broadest sense of the term...at once political, economic and social...Each period has its own notion of normality'. This sense of historical relativity allows Foucault to examine the fixed assumptions that underpin the exercise of authority. In his speech 'The dangerous individual', he shows how psychiatry was pressed into the service of the law to create a category of dementia which established 'the right to punish...not only on the basis of what men do, but also of what they are, or of what it is supposed they are'. He links the emergence of the idea of the dangerous individual to the need of the state to equate the political revolutionaries of France in 1848 and the Commune of 1871 with criminality.

It is precisely this concept of relativity that gets the better of Foucault. It denies him a framework within which he can sift out the essential conflicts from the peripheral. All questions are reduced to the manichean collision of authority, as the embodiment of power, and its victims. This is a conflict which is insurmountable because there is no identifiable agent of change. Hence Foucault sees only the role of the intellectual 'who destroys evidence and generalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present time, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of force, who is incessantly on the move, doesn't know where he is heading nor what he will think tomorrow for he is too attentive to the present'. Lacking the bearings of a social movement for change, Foucault's insights are in constant danger of being put to repressive uses. His assault on the psychiatric profession has been employed to justify the policy of discharging the mentally ill from the hospitals to face a life of homelessness and police harassment called 'care in the community'.

The inherent weakness of the postmodernist thinkers is that their relativisation of all certainty lacks any agency of change. Having written off the working class, postmodernist relativism is transformed into a scepticism towards the possibility of change. This weakness accounts for the ease with which the theory has been appropriated by academia. Nicholas Xenos' *Scarcity and Modernity* is an example of the taming of postmodernism's critical insights. Xenos turns his fire on the concept of scarcity, finding it to be a function of abundance. He quotes Karl Marx's distinction between the relative and the absolute wage to show that want is socially and historically determined. Rather than map out a challenge to those relations that relegate one class to want while raising the other to abundance, Xenos wonders: 'Perhaps the best we can hope for is to free our minds from this concept that has taken hold of it.'

The apparent meeting point between conservative ideas and the postmodern theory of the radical intelligentsia suggests that the idea ought to take off in a big way. But the plethora of recent publications invoking the term in their titles is deceptive. Most academics are staring into the abyss of postmodern relativism with a caution that suggests a lingering commitment to objectivity. *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity* is an example of the ambiguity of academia's response to postmodernism.

Editor Bryan Turner wants postmodernism to be an extension of the modern rather than a repudiation of it. Barry Smart looks for a distinction between a 'postmodernism of resistance' and a 'postmodernism of reaction'. Scott Lash tries to reclaim the term from the French philosophers in favour of the American architects who coined it. Lash wants to foist what he sees as the anti-humanism of the modern movement in architecture on to the French writers Baudrillard, Lyotard and Foucault. He insists that the real postmodernism of the American architects Jenks and Venturi is a recovery of the human and historical dimension. That the chintzy homeliness of American reaction against Bauhaus can be seen as a challenge to the status quo only reveals Lash's limited horizons. But the real story of *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity* is the unwillingness of academia to follow the French philosophers down the path to relativism.

This resistance to postmodernism is due to a prior commitment, not to revolutionary change, but to traditional sociology. However, their critical attitude does reveal some insights into the popularity of the theory. Smart employs a useful allusion to the collapse of American hegemony, suggesting 'the preoccupation with the "postmodern", may be symptomatic not so much of the demise or exhaustion of the "modern", as a belated recognition of its geopolitical relocation, the shift of its creative and innovatory momentum and influence to the Pacific rim and the developing societies of the East'. It is a point that Roland Robertson also makes

less successfully when he links postmodernism to the 'strengthening of the particular-universal "dialectic"'. The rational element in all this jargon is that universal ideas about the destiny of America are difficult to sustain in an age of uncertainty and international divisions.

Looked at in this way the differential response to postmodernism becomes more understandable. Those countries whose position in the world order has become more precarious, such as the USA and France, have provided fertile ground for a theory that raises uncertainty to a permanent condition. As the cohesion of the ruling class internationally is less secure, its ideas move towards a more local perspective. This differential response is illustrated by the German Jurgen Habermas' *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* on the one hand, and the collection of British essays *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* on the other.

Identity: Community, Culture, Difference is the collected papers of a conference organised by the soft left associated with the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone and *Marxism Today*. The contributions are in keeping with the narrow preoccupations of the British radical intelligentsia. Lacking the iconoclasm of the French postmodernists, their concern with identity is no less parochial in its consequences. The celebration of the different experiences of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, feminists and gay activists is on the one hand banal, because we know their experiences are different. But on the other hand it is conservative, because these differences are counterposed to collective action.

Though linking postmodernism to the 'demoralising decade of Thatcherism', Kobena Mercer assumes that 'everybody knows that everyday life is so complex that no singular belief system or Big Story can hope to explain it all'. Jeffrey Weeks and Simon Watney both try to cope with the competing claims of different identity groups, with Weeks plumping for tolerance, while Watney wants to see minority rights removed from political debate by being enshrined in a constitution. The project of social transformation is rejected as a fairy story, while the hope that everyone would just get on with each other is granted the status of a political programme. While these British theorists share many of the localising preoccupations of the French, the lack of urgency in the formation of new ideas is evident in the ease with which the latest fad coexists with old ideas about the welfare state. In his *Social Theory After Postmodernism*, Anthony Woodiwiss carries this to extremes by grafting an introduction about postmodernism on to his book about law and Marxism.

While these two books are peculiarly British in their small-mindedness, Habermas' *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* indicates the relative certainty of contemporary German thought. As the architect of the new Europe, Germany is least beset by the doubts that dog the other leading powers. Habermas' 12 lectures are a self-assured rebuttal of the postmodern critique of reason which he traces back from Foucault and Jacques Derrida to Friedrich Nietzsche's elevation of the will to power over all questions of objectivity. He identifies the problem 'not as an excess but as a deficit of rationality'. The birth of modern philosophy in the Enlightenment, he holds, took a wrong turn in adopting a 'subject-centered' rationality. This problem was aggravated by Hegel and Marx whom Habermas accuses of modelling their concepts of reason (in the former) and the emancipation of labour (in the latter) on the self-conscious subject. The model of a process of self-education on the part of this subject is flawed because of its circularity. This leaves it open to rejection at the hands of the irrationalists, or displacement by a rationality of 'communicative action'. Habermas' theory of communicative action is a version of pluralism, in which rationality is based on agreement between subjects rather than the knowledge of the subject.

In the debate with postmodernism, Habermas reveals a confidence in the possibility of consensus that seems remarkably complacent next to the angst-ridden French and British contributions. He holds up the cohesive tendencies in capitalist society as positive, while rejecting its divisive tendencies as negative, with little attempt to understand their relationship. Whereas the postmodernists emphasise difference, Habermas accentuates consensus. But both are two sides of the same coin. Capitalism acts as a cohesive force in so far as it eliminates regional and parochial divisions and brings people together in a nationwide division of labour. But it acts as a force for fragmentation because it divides society along national, class, ethnic and sexual lines. The possibility of consensus is forever circumscribed in a society based upon the division between antagonistic social classes. Consensus cannot be wished into being: it is constantly disrupted by the disintegrative tendencies inherent in capitalist society which the postmodernists ultimately celebrate and which Habermas tries to wish out of existence.

Gemma Forest reviews

Michael Porter, *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*, Macmillan, £25 hbk; Christopher Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal, *Managing Across Borders: The Transnational Solution*, Hutchinson, £25 hbk

Not so transnational

In *Competitive Strategy* (1980), Michael Porter trained a generation of US managers in ruthlessness. Beset by new market entrants, the threat of product substitution, buyer power, supplier power and direct rivals, Porter said they should make their products different, target distinct markets and strive for 'overall cost leadership' (cut wages and jobs). Today Porter presses a similar competitive strategy on the US government. Four years and more than 30 researchers in the making, *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* tells us a lot about where inter-imperialist rivalries have got to.

Porter rightly stresses that 'in a world of increasingly global competition, nations have become more, not less important'. He attacks Smith, Ricardo and the classical theory of competition among nations: that of comparative advantage. Modern supporters of comparative advantage put national prosperity down to abundant land and natural resources, low exchange and interest rates, good general education and infrastructure, and labour that is plentiful and cheap. Pointing to the success of Japan, Italy, and Korea, Porter dismisses resources, noting too that low resource Germany and Switzerland do well even with high currencies and wages. Instead, he eulogises long-run, evolutionary and revolutionary innovation, especially in export markets.

However he also praises home-market consumers as drivers of innovation and exports. For Porter, it was consumer demand for cheap, convenient disposability which made the USA the first mass production, mass market society and which favoured US exports. Likewise, cramped homes have forced Japan to make products light, thin, short, small—and thus appealing to the whole world.

In order to play the role of a hegemonic power, a nation must be able to foist its way of life on others. But in lauding consumers, Porter follows the impressionism of every US economist since Thorstein Veblen first publicised 'conspicuous consumption' in his *Economic Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). It was supplies for the railroad and the car industry, not for wealthy families, which fuelled the rise of US imperialism. It is Porter's 112 machine tool companies in Japan, not that country's hot summer apartments, dear electricity and sleek yuppie air conditioning units, that have given Tokyo much of its clout. Capital goods are what make an imperialist power, not its consumers' voracious appetite for gadgets.

Porter makes proposals which recall the wimpish, New England side of George Bush: educate for specialised industrial skills, encourage Volvo-style exporters through stringent consumer protection, favour corporate long-termism by fiscal means, end Reaganesque hostility to anti-trust laws. But, like Bush, Porter is also deeply conservative. The USA should run no industrial, managed-trade, exchange-or-interest-rate policy. It should see instead that national prowess is about 'not enjoying advantage but coping with disadvantage'.

What does Porter mean by 'coping with disadvantage'? Despite his protestations that high wages on the German model are good, he has to admit that Japan's post-war growth was founded on low pay. When he says that capitalist nations profit in adversity, what he really means is that they profit from prolonged defeats of the working class. Porter's empirical survey of 10 industrial nations only covers firms over the period 1971-85. He ignores how US imperialism benefited from what happened to the trade unions in the Depression and the New Deal, or how German and Japanese employers profited under Allied occupation.

Porter avoids the conflictual mid-century era, preferring to highlight the current *cooperation* between Japanese firms and their suppliers. The word is a joke. Japanese firms are ruthless with suppliers. For Porter, 'Just-In-Time' (JIT) delivery scheduling reflects high Japanese land prices, which work against long production lines and big inventories. In reality, the frenzy of JIT and of Japanese working practices reflect the enduring defeat of the working class.

Aside from 'disadvantage', Porter identifies 'murderous' local competition as the main boost to gross national product growth. The adjective well describes the direction he is going in: if biotechnology firms in Boston do well from savaging each other, how will they deal with overseas foes? Porter sees war between

nations as a 'chance development' and attacks the US defence industry for relying on the Pentagon to the detriment of civilian exports. He forgets that competition among nations must lead to aggression; that running a state-backed defence industry is not an option; that 'civilising' defence firms away from arms production and arms exports is a costly business, and one that takes firms into crowded civilian markets.

Porter sees as a sign of strength not just export performance, but the export of capital. This is in fact a sign of weakness: at bottom, it reflects low profitability at home. The post-war export of US capital begins in the fifties, which Porter rightly casts as a period of low growth in investment and productivity. This leads us to Christopher Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal, and their book on 'multinational', 'global' and 'transnational' firms.

The multinational—engineering and designing things at home but allowing overseas subsidiaries some independence—hit its stride in the sixties. After the French Europeanist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber complained of *The American Challenge* (1967), it seemed that multinationals in general and American ones in particular could trample their way round national governments. In his famous *Sovereignty at Bay* (1971), US scholar Raymond Vernon announced that multinationals were victors over nation states.

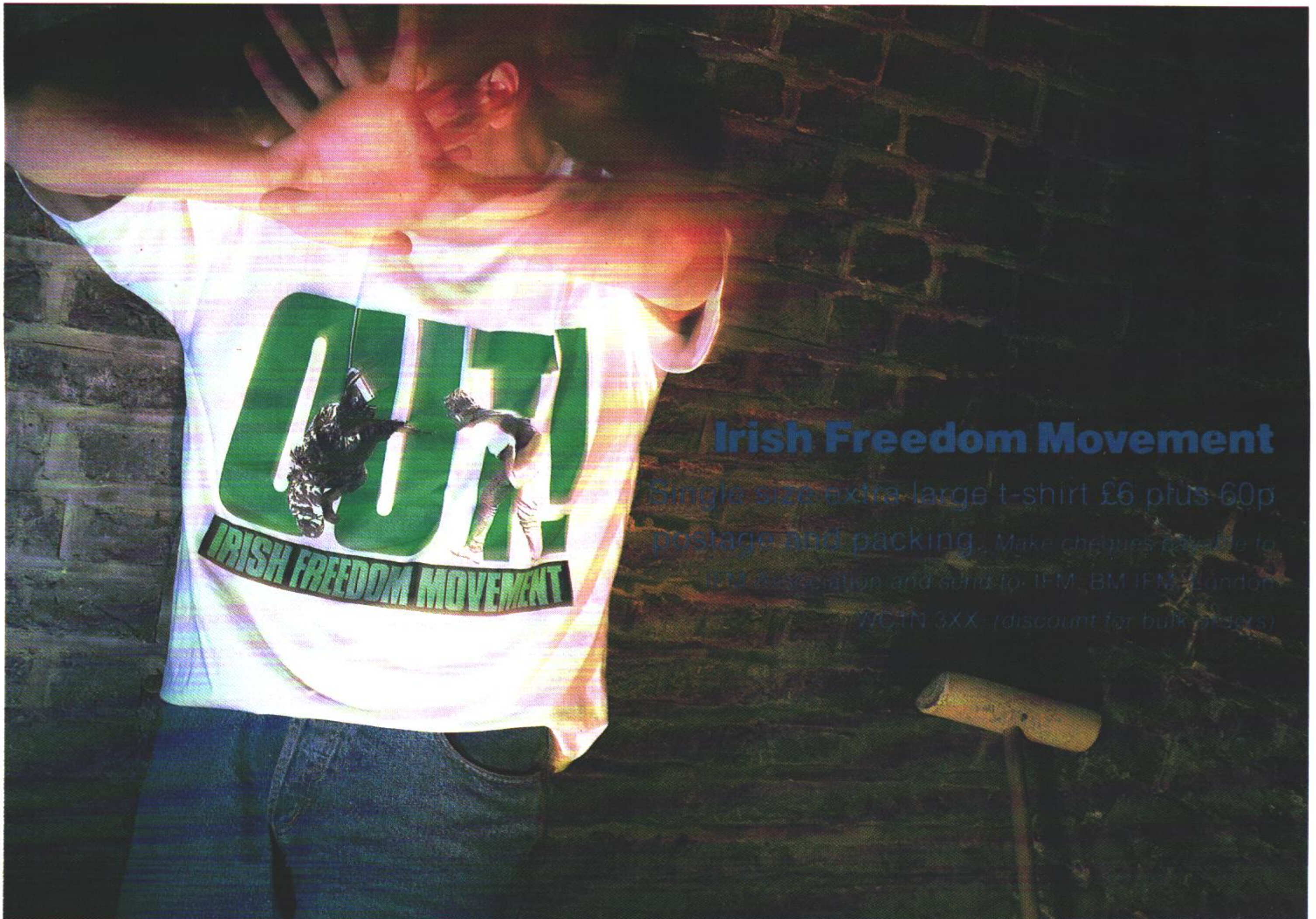
After the recessions of the seventies and eighties, the mood changed. In a seminal article as editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, Ted Levitt announced that the multinational had to deny its local subsidiaries autonomy and turn into a 'global' (March/April 1983). Transport and communications had made even the third world want Cokes, Big Macs and Sonys. Firms should now make the same product the same way at all world locations, keep things simple and reap economies of scale.

If US multinationals followed Levitt's plea for economies by disinvesting from Europe in the mid-eighties, they ignored his desperate search for yuppy markets in the underdeveloped world. Today, however, Bartlett and Ghoshal play up the importance of the Europe of 1992 as an investment site, as well as that of the North American trade bloc and the Asean region. They urge, however, that globals recognise today's protectionist climate and become responsive to local conditions. Furthermore, they advise globals to become transnationals: firms that coordinate dispersed innovation capabilities around the world and 'leverage' the learning of diverse national centres by means of a core 'organisational psychology' and 'a new management mentality'.

Neither the depth nor the breadth of today's capital exports are as extensive as the authors imagine. For its overseas investments in cars and chips, Japan favours local content in production and even local research labs. Equally, US car and computer firms have invested heavily in 1992, while US service giants Citicorp and Time Warner today run a fifth of sales overseas. From the factories of weak European states, Nestlé, Electrolux, Philips, ICI and others put more than 70 per cent of their assets abroad. Yet most of the assets of US and Japanese manufacturers are held at home, and no manufacturer worldwide has more shares owned abroad than at home. We are still very far from what *Business Week* hailed as the 'stateless corporation' (14 May 1990).

Anyway, from *which HQ* will the new transnational managers do this work of 'coordination'? *Who* will leverage foreign laboratories' learning? *What country* will lead in terms of main assets, share ownership and managerial ethos? Bartlett and Ghoshal don't ask these questions; but they do provide answers. They distinguish between the 'family capitalism' of Europe, the 'managerial capitalism' of the USA, and the 'group capitalism' of Japan, and suggest that national roots have a commanding influence on corporate behaviour. In short, they show that the national origins of world firms continue to give them a strong national identity.

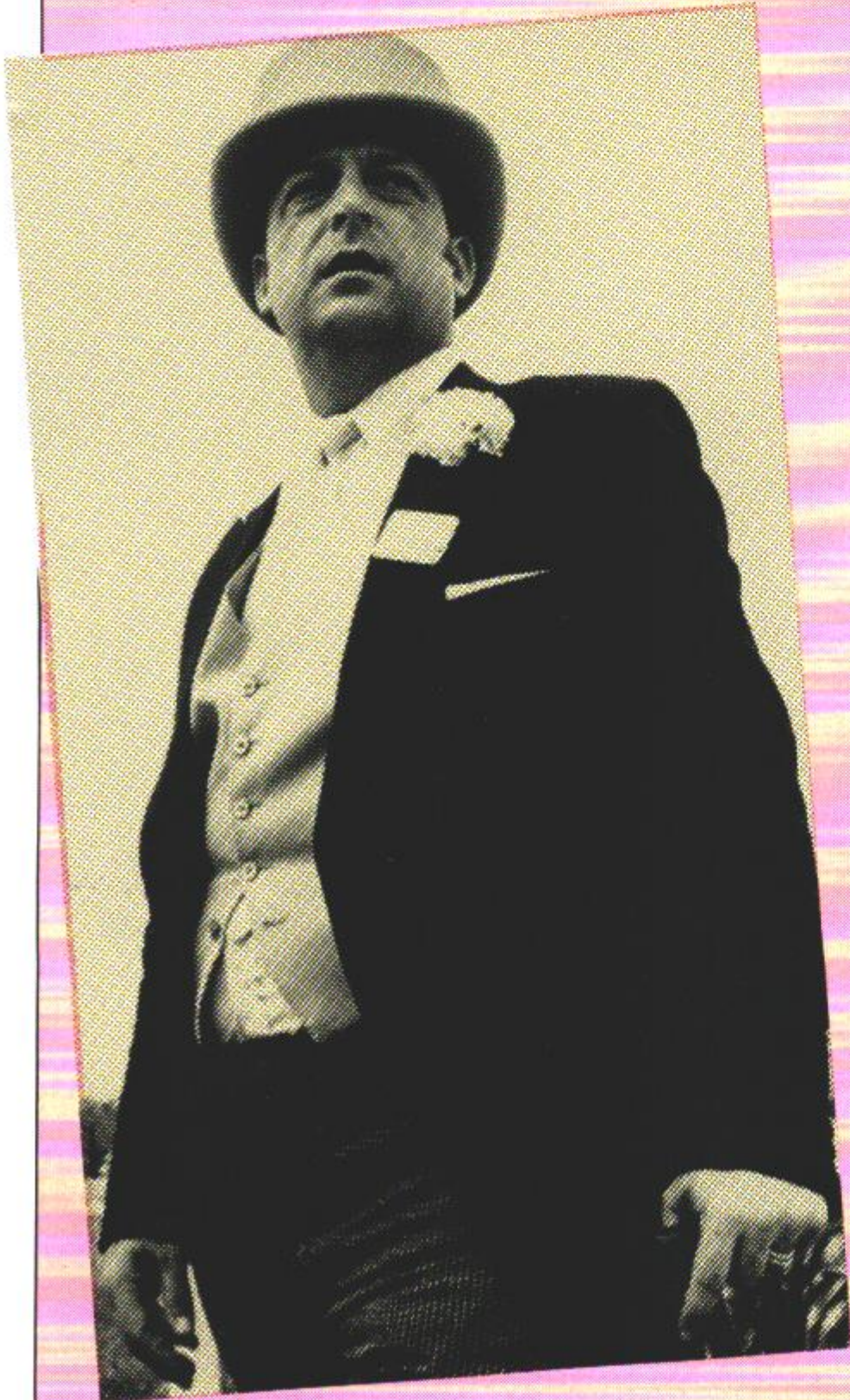
When a 'transnational' in country A wants, against the will of country B, to 'leverage' the learning or anything else of a unit in country B, we are once again looking at a recipe for war. This is what Bartlett and Ghoshal share with Michael Porter, even though they are all well-educated and well-meaning men.



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